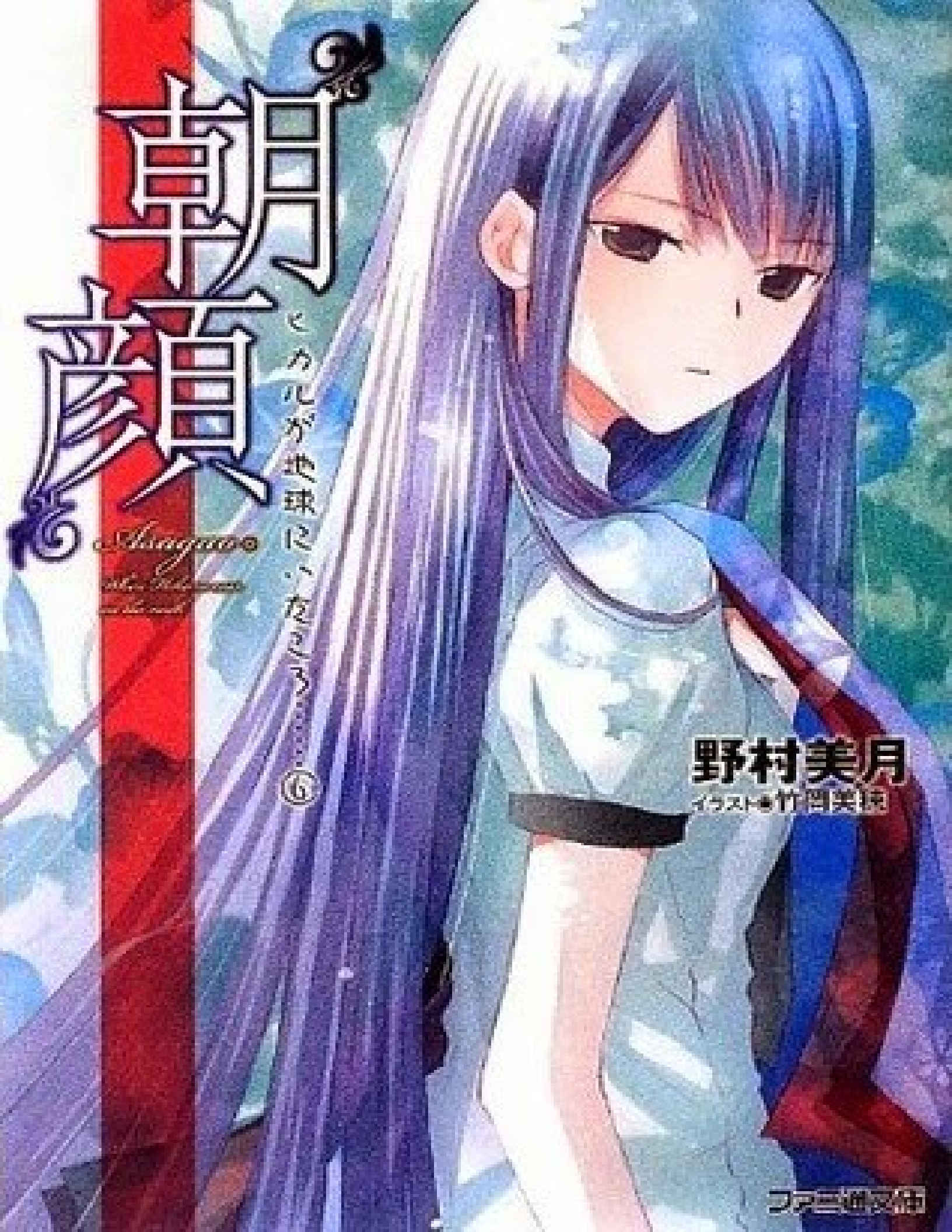
朝顔
ヒカルが地球にいたころ…⑥
野村美月
イラスト●竹岡美穂
ファミ通文庫

Table of Contents

[Hikaru V6] Prologue
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 1
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 2
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 3
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 4
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 5
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 6
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 7
[Hikaru V6] Chapter 8
[Hikaru V6] Epilogue
[Hikaru V6] Side Story
[Hikaru V6] Author's Notes

[Hikaru V6] Prologue

Everyone around you finds it unbelievable as to why you are being treated so coldly.
Why exactly would a person beautiful and spirited be rejected with aloof eyes and spiteful words?
Whenever I was being advised on this, my heart would be angsty within.
I wanted to yell, yell, yell, until my throat became hoarse.
No, no, no, this actually is not the case.
I actually did not wish to avert the clear expression of yours.
I wanted to respond to those sweet words of yours with the best smile I could ever give.
However, Hikaru--
What I did was what you most despised, the one thing you hated most on this world.

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 1

"If we are talking about pretty princesses that can be met in the Summer wild, I suppose they will be lilies."
It was Summer vacation, and half of August had passed.
Koremitsu was sweating all over, starting from the forehead, as he worked on his holidays assignments in the room devoid of an electric fan. Hikaru, in turn, spoke coolly.
"The lush green grass shall absorb the heat of Summer, and on the other side of the grass, there stands the slender figure of a girl radiating a refreshing feeling, such that one can forget the searing heat on one glance at her. Oh yes, there is such a waka recorded in the Man'yoshu."
Then, he sung with a richly sweet voice,
"On the grassy wayside, the lilies bloom. With a smile, shall I call you my wife? What it means here is that even amidst the green grass, if I am able to see your smile bloom like the lily, is that sufficient for me to call you my wife? The lily that appears here has to be pink, a cute Princess Lily. This 'hime' princess reminds of the 'himi' in the word 'secret', cute and yet has some voluptuous sense to her that causes a man's heart to flutter. Hey, Koremitsu, you do not have to frown like that and try to imagine it like solving an official event. Just imagine a girl amidst the tall, lush grass, peering at you. At the moment your eyes meet hers, she will say to you 'don't just call me your wife', her cheeks blushing.”
"Like I know anything about that."
Koremitsu fanned himself with a circular silk fan as he answered nonchalantly.
"You look very hot there yourself. Anyway, since you're a ghost, hurry up and cool this room down."
"Please do not be unreasonable. You do know very well that I am a useless ghost who cannot do anything other than to cosplay, right? Oh yes, how about I try putting on a tennis outfit. I suppose surely it would be like living a summer shelter. Perhaps I would be able to feel the cooling breeze blowing upon the silver birch grove."
Once he said that, he immediately transformed into a white tennis wear with white shorts, his light brown hair swaying gently in the air, radiating a clear smile. There was a blue wrist guard on his arm, and his head had a similar colored band on it.
"What do you think, Koremitsu? Do you feel refreshed like the blooming lilies at a summer shelter resort?"
Hikaru tried swinging his racket at Koremitsu, but there was no wind being blown at the latter. Quite the opposite, it caused Koremitsu's head to boil, his body sizzling.
"That's enough already and get back to the corner, shut up and sit in a Seiza."

"That is cruel of you, Koremitsu. It is rare to have a summer vacation, and you are focusing on doing homework since morning. The thing about summer vacation is that you have to wait till the end of it and copy from other girls."
"Stop saying such despicable things with that angelic pure smile. Also, if I'm going to ask someone to lend me homework with that bad man look of mine, it'll just be assumed as
intimidation
One of them was Hikaru, hailed a harem prince with girls offering themselves freely to him. The other end of the spectrum of himself, called a wild dog and being ostracized out of fear. Clearly, their positions were different.
"Hey you, let me copy your homework."
If Koremitsu were to say that, the girls would definitely leave their notebooks on his desk with trembling hands, and run off.
"Eh? But if it is Miss Shikibu, I suppose she will be willing to let you copy."
Koremitsu let out a groan,
"And her face will probably turn pink like the princess lilies, "I-I guess I have no other choice!" saying something like that shrilly."
"D-Don't mention about Shikibu…"
As it was too embarrassing, Koremitsu's body started to heat up again, his face beetroot like it had been ironed through.
On a certain previous night, he sneaked into the school pool with his classmate Honoka Shikibu, splashing water at each other, chasing each other in the water--and on top of that, they did things that would cause people to blush. Ever since then, whenever Hikaru mentioned about Honoka, Koremitsu would sense an itchy, mysterious feeling in his heart. In the end, Koremitsu would avert his eyes inadvertently, fidgeting about, his voice sounding strange.
And Hikaru's leisurely, conceited face in as he watched Koremitsu's weird responses was an eyesore to the latter.
"Hey, Koremitsu, forget about homework and ask Miss Shikibu out. Oh yes, how about calling Miss Aoi out too and we go on a double date, the 4 of us? Wow~ that might be enjoyable!"
"Won't the passers-by just look at me as if I'm a two-timer or something!?"
"Eh? You do intend to two-time on Miss Aoi and Miss Shikibu, Koremitsu?"
Hikaru was taken aback.
"Like I am! What are you talking about!? How can I possibly do something like that!? I'm not you."
"Well, that is true after all. Ah, that really shocked me. However, I do wish to make something clear. What do you think about MIss Aoi?"
"Wh-what do you mean...of course she's your fiancee."
"And then?"
"Wait, anything else?"

Hikaru approached Koremitsu with a suspicious look, and the latter panicked,
"Do you not find Miss Aoi to be really cute or something, like she is someone you have to protect?"
"Y-yeah, compared to the beginning when she just flat out ostracized everyone, I suppose Aoi has changed completely, and is really cute, or maybe her expression is somewhat gentle, and that she suddenly became rather feminine...I think she's a woman important to you, so I feel that I have to help her if something happens to her."
"Koremitsu, as expected, you…"
Hikaru again looked extremely rattled.
"I said it before already, it's not like that."
"You're annoying, damn it. Didn't you look really cheerful, saying 'oh, this is fine, I think' when you let me pretend to be Aoi's boyfriend?"
And so, Hikaru immediately puffed his cheeks,
"That was merely just to maintain a facade, and back then, Miss Aoi did look really troubled. At that time, that was all I could say. I really felt conflicted inside me, even if you and Miss Aoi were pretending to be a couple. Of course, it is not a lie that I wish Miss Aoi could be happy, and that you are my friend, my hero. Both of you are most important to me, b-but when both of you were chatting in front of me, I felt as if it was some sort of a penalty game. And and also, Miss Aoi's lover has to be more handsome than me, has a more pleasant voice than mine, is more interesting than me, is more knowledgeable about floral languages than me, and more...”
“I get it! I get it already! Calm down now! Approach me anymore, and your head's going to go through my own head!”
Koremitsu tried his best to curb Hikaru, his back leaning on the desk.
(This kid's hard to understand. Rather gloomy too.)
“I don't want to do anything to my friend's girlfriend, and Aoi won't have any thoughts about me.”
"Is that really the case? You have become quite the popular man yourself recently, Koremitsu, somewhat cool.”
“W-what nonsense are you spouting now?”
The description of being popular was truly was a complete transformation from his old self, where girls started to shun him since the beginning of middle school. Koremitsu's face started to heat up.
Hikaru continued to pout insolently as he wanted to continue, only for the cellphone on Koremitsu's desk to ring.
Once he spotted the caller, Koremitsu let out a weird sound.
Of all moments, it had to be Aoi.
(Damn it. What's with this timing?)
But just when he was still holding onto the cellphone, the ring stopped.
Koremitsu was so shocked, he merely stared at the phone blankly.
“What was that? A wrong call?”
"So it was from Miss Aoi?”

Hikaru glanced aside, looking as if he had expected it.
(Argh, I'm not a woman here, so stop looking at me like some sort of widowed woman. Ah damn it, I can't call back now.)
“Well...I guess If she really had something, she'll call back.”
Cautious about Hikaru's stare, Koremitsu said with a nonchalant tone, placing his cellphone back on the desk.
At this moment, the phone rang again.
He felt his heart jump out of his mouth. However, he saw that the caller was not Aoi, but an anonymous number.
He received the call, placed the phone at his ear, and heard a timid voice,
E-erm...Mr Akagi? Do you know who I am?”
“Hanasato...?”
The image of the bespectacled class representative with braids appeared in his mind. She sound really delighted, answering,
Yes, th-that's right. This is Michiru Hanasato. Ah, s-sorry about this. It's rather sudden...were you surprised? I got your number from Hono, Mr Akagi...”
Why would Hanasato of all people call me at such a moment? Is this what a network is about?
While Koremitsu pondered about it, Michiru stammered, before continuing,
Mr Akagi, d-d-do you want to go for a study meet?”
“Study meet?”
Yes. At the library. Shall we do our summer homework together? I'm calling Hono along too, the three of us.”
When Honoka's name was mentioned, he felt his heart jump.
Erm, is that not good? Are you busy today?”
“No, I'm doing my summer homework now.”
I see. It will be more efficient for us to work together. Why don't you come along, Mr Akagi?”
She invited him passionately.
He answered, and she sounded more delighted, seemingly relieved,
Thank goodness. I'll see you then. With Ho-Ho-Ho-Hono.”
After she informed him the location of the library, the phone call was halted.
A study meet with girls? I suppose that is some kind of a summer vacation event, no?”
His mood now uplifted, Hikaru spoke cheerfully,
“Hey, isn't Hanasato supposed to be terrified of me or something?”
"I do suppose it has to be because she knew that you are not a savage delinquent. And this probably is to help repair your relationship with Miss Shikibu. Girls always do like doing such things.”
"Okay now. It is not a good thing to keep a girl waiting.
While Koremitsu panicked, Hikaru chimed in cheerfully
Koremitsu informed his aunt Koharu that he would not be having lunch as he was going to the library. Shioriko, carrying Lapis in her hands, overheard this and exclaimed,

“I wanna go too!”
“No, I got others with me this time. I'll bring you out next time, Shiiko.”
Koremitsu recalled how at the start of the summer vacation, he brought Shioriko, Honoka and Michiru to the pool, creating such a ruckus, and because of that incident, firmly refused. However, Shioriko's eyes seemed uneasy as she asked over and over again,
“Who're you going with?”
“People at school.”
After hearing such vague words from Koremitsu, she grabbed his arm, not too weakly, and not too strongly.
“I want to go too. I'll stay put obediently, okay? Pretty please, big brother?”
She continued to shake his arm gently as she begged,
Because of his
little sister
begging him like this, Koremitsu faltered. While he groaned, the white cat Lapis got down to Shioriko's feet, and stared at Koremitsu coolly with her blue eyes like a passer-by.
And at that moment, there was a voice from the side,
“Shiiko, you have to go for dodgeball practice!”
“See, your friends are waiting for you now. It's important to remain in contact with your friends.”
“I'll go cheer for you at the tournament.”
“Big brother.”
Koremitsu left the still displeased Shioriko behind and turned to leave the house through the corridor,
Ahh, she really is puffing her cheeks round there. You do have to give her quite the service when you get back home, big brother.”
“Shut up!!”
♢ ♢ ♢
Under the sun rays of midsummer that seemed ready to bake anything, Koremitsu passed through the automatic doors of the public library near the school. The air conditioned room was wide open, ostensibly a freezer.
He spotted Honoka dressed in casual wear, her notes spread all over the table, and approached her tensely, calling out to her,
Honoka lifted her head in surprise.
The chair let out a loud thud, and she, basked in the stares of the onlookers, shrank back, her cheeks red. She then looked up tentatively at Koremitsu, whispering,
“Wh-why are you here, Akagi?”
“Huh? I got called here by Hanasato. The 3 of us are doing homework together.”
“Michiru!?”
Honoka widened her eyes.
And suddenly, she became flustered,
“You're kidding...! That Michiru...”

While she continued to mutter,
“You didn't hear from Hanasato about me coming here?”
“I-I'm just invited here to do the summer vacation homework in the library...”
For some reason, Honoka looked really troubled.
And after that,
“Mr Akagi, you came by!”
A delighted voice rang.
Koremitsu turned back to look, and his jaw dropped.
Honoka too looked dumbstruck,
and lastly, Hikaru was left amazed.
Michiru, who said that she would wear the school uniform when going out, was at this point dressed in a lemon yellow one-piece dress fit for summer, coupled with a white cardigan with frills on it. Also, there was a little ribbon-shaped necklace around her neck.

That was not all.
She was not wearing her glasses, and her hair was not tied in braids. The soft, gentle-looking brown curls were rolled to her shoulders, swaying lightly. Perhaps she had put on contact lens, and the large eyes usually hidden under the spectacles were no longer covered. She looked up at Koremitsu shyly.
“Are you...Hanasato?”
He unconsciously affirmed.
“Yes, that's right. Erm...since it's summer vacation, I thought maybe...I could be a little more bold. Do-does it suit me?”
Very cute there! The old-fashioned glasses gives the vibe of a serious-looking girl, and it does look nice here, but this one does suit you well too, adding quite some splendor to it. The refreshing Tachibana flower gives off a sweet fragrance that causes my head to get dizzy!"
Hikaru marveled
(Anyway...that's quite the change.)
If he had not heard her voice, he would not imagine the plain, rigid and bespectacled class representative to be the same person as the one in front of him.
Koremitsu was left so surprised he could not say anything, and Honoka, giving the same stunned look, stated clumsily,
“That's not true. It really suits you there, and you really look cute, Michiru.”
“Don't you think so too, Akagi?”
She looked up at Koremitsu worriedly, saying this to him.
“Eh, yeah, I guess. It's nice, I suppose.”
Koremitsu could sense some serious in Honoka's stare for some strange reason, and could only stammer back. Michiru's face was dyed pink as she gave a bashful look.

And meanwhile, Honoka's expression was a stark contrast, completely frozen.
“M-Michiru, seriously there, why didn't you tell me Akagi was coming? It shocked me there.”
“Sorry, Hono. But I thought that you'll be fine with Mr Akagi around. Erm…is that a bad thing?”
Michiru suddenly became quite tentative.
Honoka's lips were lifted, becoming a pout,
“That's not the case. With Akagi here, I don't have to worry about him trying to woo other girls. It's just that…I was really shocked.”
Honoka spoke with her usual carefree tone.
“Okay now, stop spacing out while staring at Michiru, Akagi. Hurry up and sit.”
Saying such words to Koremitsu violently.
Koremitsu was about to retort back, saying that he was not looking, only to find that Honoka was already seated behind him, causing him to miss out on this opportunity.
And Koremitsu too pulled out the chair, sitting down uneasily,
Ah, Koremitsu! You cannot sit there!”
It seemed Hikaru exclaimed something.
Michiru took the seat beside Koremitsu, and sat down.
Seated opposite Koremitsu was Honoka, her expression a little stiff.
For some reason, Hikaru had his head in his hands.
(What's bad about this seat? It's not like there's some doodle or glue on it.)
Hikaru was amazed by Michiru's transformation back then, praising her to be really pretty cute; at this point however, he looked feeble, ostensibly at a loss of words, timid. This caused Koremitsu too to be restless, unable to calm down.
“Mr Akagi, may I know how far are you done with the maths paper?”
Michiru spoke to him shyly.
Koremitsu flipped through the question pages with his fingers clumsily, and answered,
“Wow, Mr Akagi. You did do your homework seriously.”
Michiru responded.
“Can you teach me this question, Mr Akagi?”
And whispered this and that to him.
As both of them were seated together, their shoulders were naturally touching each other, while Koremitsu backed away slightly, wondering if they were too close to each other. Michiru too looked as if she realized the distance between them, fidgeting about as she shrank back. She however did not seem to hate it, merely a little shy.
In response to Koremitsu's constrained explanation,
“Thanks. Your explanation was easy to understand Akagi. Ah, please teach me this too.”
Michiru answered, and she approached Koremitsu, controlling her distance.

On the other side, Honoka was completely quiet, ostensibly having forgotten to breathe as she closed her lips tight, her shoulders and face frozen as she flipped through the dictionary, translating English.
She would sometimes show a feeble look as she stare at the hair swaying on Michiru's shoulder and the pink cheeks. Whenever that happened, a weaker expression would show.
She tried her best not to look at Koremitsu in the eyes, clumsily averted her eyes away from his face. Whenever Koremitsu said something however, her shoulders would jump slightly.
Honoka did not say anything ever since she sat down, and this caused Koremitsu some concern.
(I'm not sure since I've never been invited to a study meet, but is it this kind of thing? Isn't it supposed to be more friendly?)
The atmosphere at this point could not be called amicable. It was solemn.
Hikaru too looked perplexed as he watched over the trio.
It seemed that Hikaru did say Michiru was intending to patch Koremitsu's relationship with Honoka, no? That did not seem to be the case at all.
(Well, it's okay whether she does so or not.)
After about an hour, Michiru got up from her seat.
“I'll go to the washroom for a little while.”
Once Michiru walked off, the atmosphere between Koremitsu and Honoka got worse immediately.
(...Is it better for me to talk to her...but it looks like she's concentrating on working on her homework...how am I supposed to talk to her...?)
“Ah...Hanasato changed.”
Koremitsu could not find anything else to say, and said so gloomily.
After he said that, Honoka's shoulders jolted again.
She answered, lowering her head.
And then, both of them went silent again. Koremitsu frowned, wondering, Is this a bad topic to start with?
At this moment, Honoka spoke up,
“About Michiru...when I told her she could be prettier, she refused, saying that it would not suit her, that it would be better for her to be like this...”
It seemed Honoka had some complicated thoughts about Michiru becoming beautiful, sounding somewhat vague as she said this.
She then closed her lips shut, and when Koremitsu wondered if she was going to remain silent, she stood up and clumsily raised her bag, saying,
“I got to update my blog now. Going back now.”
“Hey, I say.”
Koremitsu got up anxiously, but Honoka whispered,
“...I think it's better for us to see each other less often.”
Huh? What's she talking about?
Honoka suddenly said some ridiculous words, leaving a dumbfounded Koremitsu behind as she slung her bag on her shoulder, lowered her head, and hurriedly left.

What is going on here!?
“I don't know. I don't understand what's going on at all. Hey, Hikaru, can you
what she just said there?”
He lifted his head, looking at the specialist of the girl's heart.
“Hm, it is not impossible, but well…the situation has become quite complicated. The friendship between girls can be unexpectedly tough to deal with. To put it, such a development is beyond my expectations…which should be prioritized? Friendship or love? Even now, I am troubled by this.”
Hikaru muttered, clearly of no use here.
At this moment, Michiru returned.
“Eh? Hono went back already? Th-then…I'll be alone with you, Mr Akagi…anyway, how about we have lunch together?”
“Sorry, I'm going back too.”
Koremitsu said as he stood up.
“I can't understand anything about women.”
Koremitsu muttered with a bitter look as he strode off to the exit.
She was so happy at the pool, and then she placed her face at his chest.
—You better protect me, okay?
She said those words to him with a sweet voice.
What did she mean by keeping a distance between them?
While Hikaru looked perturbed as he watched on, Koremitsu frowned and slouched his back as he exited the library. The cellphone in his pocket vibrated.
When he finally pulled it out, the vibration stoppe.
He checked the caller, and again, it was Aoi.
Koremitsu's eyes became sharp this time.
“Something happened to Aoi after all?”
This time, Hikaru did not show any jealously, merely looked worried.
How about giving Miss Aoi a phone call, Koremitsu?”
Koremitsu immediately dialed back, but his line got cut off, only leaving a voice message beep.
He was sure she was on a day off from her part-time work at the cafe.
“Let's just go to her house, alright?”
Seeing that Hikaru nodded in approval, Koremitsu walked off.
◇ ◇ ◇
There was a sharp looking, red-haired, delinquent-like Koremitsu wandering around the posh looking residence on the private land, barricaded by tall walls; clearly, he did not fit in well with the surrounding elegance. The next question would be whether he would be deemed a suspicious person and get taken away by the police for questioning.
He actually wanted to give a serious look.
He gave Aoi a few calls on this way to this place, but as expected, it was hung up.

(Did something happen at her workplace? Did Hikaru's older brother do something again?)
Unlike Hikaru, Koremitsu did not have impure feelings for Aoi. It was only because of Hikaru that Koremitsu was able to be on such terms with Aoi. And thus at this point, his feelings of wanting to protect Aoi was not simply because it was at Hikaru's behest, but that he really wanted to protect her. He never denied this.
For Aoi was so pure, so pretty, yet so fragile...
For Aoi was the first girl Koremitsu felt was cute...
Suddenly, Koremitsu heard a grim voice,
“That is enough already, Aoi.”
Koremitsu inadvertently stopped in his tracks.
Standing in front of Aoi's house was a tall, intelligent, mature looking girl, chiding Aoi loudly with an unnatural look.
“I know you're in the house. Why aren't you picking up the phone? If I'm willing, I can go to your house and ask someone to open the door.”
Hikaru muttered as he floated about.
Chiding harshing into the phone was Hikaru's cousin, the student council president Asai Saiga.
“What are you playing about? If you are not going to come out, how am I to know? I called you not to hear the purring of that house cat that is always thinking about sausages. You also hid the fact that you decided to go do a part-time job from me, no—Aoi!”
It seemed the voice message had ended.
Asai frowned her thin long eyebrows, looking distressed as she stared at the phone. She dialed again, placed the phone at her ear, and closed her lips as she emitted fury. It seemed Aoi did not pick up the phone again as Asai's expression grew grimmer by the moment.
“What are you thinking...Aoi.”
“You got into an argument with Aoi, Asa?”
Koremitsu asked as he approached Asai.
Asai's shoulders shivered, and she spotted Koremitsu. Her eyes looked like blades as she narrowed them.
“How many times do I have to repeat that I do not wish to be called Asa by you. Is your brain like a bird that forget everything after 3 steps?”
She spoke coldly.
“Why're you being so loud for? It's because your eyes become so sharp that Aoi's scared and hiding from you.”
Asai's eyes shot an icy glint,
“Neither Aoi nor I have anything to do with a bird-brained wild hound. Why are you wandering around Aoi's house? If you continue to stalk Aoi, I will have to lock you into a mental asylum in the hills.”
Asai raised her chin slightly as she stared at Koremitsu, but she did not seem to be in good condition.
Is Asa pushing herself again?

Hikaru stared at Asai worriedly, the latter's upper body passed him as she tumbled forward.
“That's dangerous—you didn't sleep again?”
Koremitsu frantically grabbed Asai, and the latter, now in Koremitsu's arms, froze, seemingly humiliated, and pushed him off hard.
“I slept—well enough. It is just that when I saw your obscene self, my body just felt uncomfortable.”
Asai spoke with a cold, haughty tone.
“Aren't you swaying about now? Don't collapse now.”
Hikaru too was beside Asai, chiming in enthusiastically, “
That is right, Asa. It is better to rest now.”
“Are those not unnecessary remarks from you?”
Asai averted her eyes, letting her long black hair sway in the air like a whip.
At this moment, her cellphone vibrated.
Once she checked who the caller was, her pretty face contorted inadvertently, and at that instance, a lethargic expression was betrayed.
She then seemingly reproached herself as she reverted back to being steely as she picked up the phone,
“Yes...my intentions have not changed. Even if you do leave, I do intend to fight on until the very end, and it is not that there is no hope. As long as I can get the word of the Asagao Princess, the balance of victory will tilt to our side. No, I intend to topple it.”
When Asai whispered the name 'Asagao Princess', Hikaru's eyes faltered for some reason, and he looked downcast.
(What is she talking about?) Koremitsu too wondered as he eavesdropped.
A black foreign vehicle suddenly appeared out of nowhere, stopping in front of Asai, and the chauffeur opened the door for her. She rode on that vehicle, and vanished from Koremitsu's sights.
Left behind was the stench of the exhaust gases that were released.
“And she wouldn't say goodbye! She's the same annoying woman as before! Argh, even if you kneel and beg me, I won't want to get involved with you!”
Koremitsu's temples were bulging as he concluded,
Koremitsu.”
Hikaru suddenly spoke seriously.
“Wh-what now?”
After seeing Hikaru's serious look, Koremitsu could not help but back away.
Hikaru was staring at Koremitsu, looking really worried, and then he suddenly floated in front of the latter, and knelt down on his knees. He then lifted his head at the latter with a grim, meaningful look.
There is something I wish to ask of you.”
“H-hey, don't just kneel in the middle of the road. Speaking of which, your request is going to be about a woman—”
I get that already, so just stand up. Just when Koremitsu was about to say this, Hikaru groveled, lowering his head.
Please fulfill my initial promise with Asa in my place no matter what.”

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 2

On the day after she met the wretched wild dog (Koremitsu actually) in front of Aoi's house, Asai left her house right before noon.
She had a lot of issues to consider, so she did not let her chauffeur drive her out, choosing instead to straighten her back and walk at a regular pace towards a tranquil residence area.
She would stroll alone on the streets whenever her thoughts were in a deadlock. Thus, she would be able to sort out the main points of the issue and find a way to resolve them.
However, the intense rays of summer was reflected off the asphalt, giving off a searing heat that caused her to lose her usual poise.
There had been one issue occurring after another in recent days regarding the one topic Asai had been most concerned with, the power struggle regarding the heir of the Mikados.
There is the Rose section supporting the first wife of the Mikado's head, Kazuaki's mother Hiroka, and the Wisteria side supporting the second wife Fujino—till this point, both sides had been on equal standing. Asai joined the Wisteria faction, continuing her fervent support in secret.
Currently, the only child inheriting the bloodline of the Mikado head was the eldest son Kazuaki. If Kazuaki were to become the head, Hiroka and her main family, the Udates, would expand their power vastly. Hiroka herself was infamous of her cruel and stubborn personality, so many were utterly terrified of it. Leaving aside the assumption that Kazuaki was meek in personality, it would be a massive problem if that mother of his had such great authority.
It was because of this that Asai chose to join the Wisteria faction.
Kazuaki was the only child of the head.
Is that so?
There is still one final gambit with the Wisteria—
She muttered this to herself.
The Tōjōs, who had supported the Mikados in management, had just the Wisterias, and the results were startling.
However at this point, there was a major commotion amongst the Roses.
The opportunity came when Kazuaki did something in front of everyone that left his mother speechless.
Before that, everyone had assumed Kazuaki was a kind, dreamy, typical cultured rich boy.
that was what they were made to assume.
It was when all the important figures related to the Mikados were gathered at a summit. Because of a little verbal gaffe made by one of the subsidiary company chairmen, his mother let out a loud outroar in front of everyone, and Kazuaki in turn tried to coax her and ease the atmosphere.

Because of that incident, everyone related to the Mikados knew that Kazuaki was not a puppet who would respond to his mother's beck and call. With that, there was no issue about letting Kazuaki take over the Mikado family.
To Asai, her biggest miscalculation was that the head of the Tōjōs, Masayuki, had thrown in his support for Kazuaki. Because of this, the heir to that family, Shungo Tōjō was so displeased by this arrangement, he wanted to slam his fist on the table.
There is no way Kazuaki can be a leader of men. His true personality is still the spider of the Udates—Rokujō. Father however feels that no matter how this person is on the inside, it does not matter as long as he can maintain a facade perfectly in front of others. The momentum is shifting towards Kazuaki, and the Tōjōs will be serving the next head of the Mikados, Kazuaki."
Kazuaki's cruelty.
The madness within.
Asai knew all about them.
If Kazuaki, who was so obsessed to Aoi, was to become the head of the Mikados, there would be no way for Aoi to run.
And perhaps, Kazuaki might have known about Hikaru's secret.
She felt a cold hand grasp her heart firmly, and inadvertently groaned.
It was the secret Hikaru hid with all his might, and even at the cost of his life. If Kazuaki were to learn of that secret, he would certainly revel in delight, expose, demean and hurt him .
And Hikaru, together with all that he left behind, would sink into the dark abyss with the sin.
(This is what I have to avoid no matter what. I cannot allow the power to fall in Kazuaki's hands. Even if we have to stab each other, I shall be the shield and sword protecting you.)
The Saiga parents were not very approving of Asai being embroiled in the Mikados' powers struggle.
Normally, if Asai was already isolated, the situation being a lost cause, Aoi would immediately force Asai to avoid this situation.
When she visited the Saotomes' residence, she received a reply stating that Aoi was out, and when she asked if she could wait inside, the servants stopped her, looking really troubled.
Aoi's parents too looked troubled as they apologized,
"I am sorry, Asa. Do you mind heading home for today?"
"Aoi is probably in that difficult age too. We really apologize about this, Asa."
She knew with certainty they were lying about her not being at home. Even though she called Aoi, there was only the cry from the cat Aoi raised.
Thus, she decided to meet Aoi directly at the cafe where the latter worked as a maid, but other waitresses took her orders instead, and Aoi was trying

her best not to look at Asai in the eyes. She bit her tender lips, her face pale as she passed by Asai stiffly.
“I am working.”
Even when Asai approached Aoi, the latter turned her face aside and left
Once she got off work, she would say “I have something urgent going on”, and take the car, leaving.
It felt like the moment when Hikaru died. Back then, Aoi was forcing herself, barricading a wall around her.
But even then, she never thought of avoiding Asai.
Asai had no idea what Aoi was thinking at this point.
They knew each other since young, but this was the first time such a matter happened. Asai was inadvertently uptight as a result.
Surely it had to do with Koremitsu Akagi's influence.
That wild dog probably intoxicated Aoi with something.
If that was not the case, it would not be reasonable to explain why Aoi would be so fervently opposed to Asai.
The intense summer sun shining from above was like that outrageous man.
Feeling peeved and hot, her usually rational mind was agitated by fury.
(Such a wretched man actually calls himself Hikaru's friend. Even if Aoi approves of him, I will not)
Of course, that wild dog surely would not know about the thing Hikaru risked his life to protect, why Hikaru put down all his flowers, and had to end his life like that.
When he was young, Hikaru inflicted wounds all over his white, pretty skin, and he looked up at Asai quietly.
—Asa…I cannot cry.
With that helpless appearance of a dreamy girl, his tragic eyes were clear, unable to let out any drop at all. The grave despair she thoroughly felt that day was accompanied by fury, and an intense pain swelled in her chest.
“…I cannot back away right now, for the sake of what Hikaru requested me to do.”
She let out such a mutter from her mouth.
There is no other way—
Shungo Tōjō let out this feeble voice from the other side of the phone.
She had no intention of relying on a man for help in the first place, but that was too feeble.
Even though he did say there was a final mean in the end.
There was the Gonomiya clan, who had a major influence upon the Mikados' power struggle. For the past few days, Asai visited the leader.
If she could get the word of proof from the 'Asagao Princess' as a guardian symbol—
The momentum
would be changed.
The sun rays raining on her were getting more intense.
The summer sun was really discomforting.

And the appearance of Koremitsu Akagi in her mind caused her entire body to be filled with disgust.
What that wild dog said certainly had to be to be a lie. Even though Hikaru may have showed the dog his weakness, he would never mention to others the true thoughts within him, and no matter how much pain and despair he had, he would never ask others for help.
It was completely impossible that Hikaru, being such a person, would ask a stray, unrefined dog. Was Hikaru that kind of person to entrust his feelings to others?
But, what if,
What if that dog really was Hikaru's friend?
(I may have no choice but to kill that dog myself.)
Her face contorted in frustration, she was about to put her hand that wiped her sweat off—
But right in front of her eyes was the one thing that vexed her in this world.
Asai was headed to the Gonomiya Residence.
And standing in front of the shut, aged wooden doors.
The bright red hair was reflecting the sun's rays, and his lips were contorted into a frown as he stared at Asai with fiery eyes. That man—no, that dog barked at Asai.
“I'm here as Hikaru's representative to fulfill the promise he had with you.”
♢ ♢ ♢
If it is Asa, she probably be headed to the Gonomiya house.
Hikaru spoke to Koremitsu with a stern look.
On the previous day, this carefree frivolous prince knelt in the middle of the road, his smooth white forehead touching the floor.
Please, Koremitsu. Please fulfill the promise between Asa and me.”
In reality, being a ghost himself, Hikarus knees and head would float slightly once he approached the floor. It would be too surreal to call it a Seiza.
I got it, I got it. Lift your head up now.”
Koremitsu wiped his sweat as he repeated those words.
Koremitsu was already very displeased about having to get involved with Asai, the latter whom treated him with disdain like a wretched wild dog.
However, the reality remained that the frivolous Hikaru would actually request him so earnestly.
And so, Koremitsu followed what Hikaru said, and waited for Asai at this place.
(Damn it, one troublesome thing is happening after another.)
Asai glanced at Koremitsu, ostensibly stumbling upon something filthy.
Why is Koremitsu Akagi at such a place?
Her eyes were anxious, practically saying,
is he here to harass me?
No, the expression clearly showed her intent of wanting to eliminate the existence called Koremitsu.

(I don't want to see your face so early in the morning either.) Koremitsu thought of saying those words, but he noticed Hikaru beside him give such a serious look,
He grimaced in his heart, swallowing his spiteful emotions as he handed Asai a piece of paper.
“Anyway, here's the schedule for the day.”
Asai's cold narrow eyes scanned the contents of this paper.
He wrote these words on the long calligraphy paper in his grandfather's calligraphy classroom, and the words of thin handwriting were,
-Search for a Tsuchinoko in the mountains.
-Catch a Kappa.
-Exchange messages with a UFO on the hill.
-Hug a snowman sleeping in the summer.
And there were many more for this 'summer vacation plan'.
Asai's cheeks were gradually dyed red.
It was not because of embarrassment, but fury. Her eyebrows were raised, her lips were quivering, and her stare was icy as she pronounced each word clearly,
“These are the promises I made with Hikaru, I suppose?”
Asa believed in Santa Claus until she was in 3
Hikaru had mentioned. She wrote in her summer vacation schedule that they would look for a Tsuchinoko and fish a kappa. They would then breed the Tsuchinoko once they catch them, and make a Tsuchinoko park for them.
This certainly was a black history for the flawless, aloof student council president Asai.
In the past, Asai passed out at the park, and when taking care of her, Koremitsu kept pestering her, asking her about this. As a result, Asai gave him a slap, and reported him to the police, calling him a pervert.
She emitted a cold aura as she read the schedule.
The sounds of flipping and ripping could be heard. She tore it up with both hands, and bit by bit, tore it down into small places.
Ah, Koremitsu put all his effort into writing it though.”
Hikaru lamented. For some reason , Asai's actions were predictable.
“Too bad for you. I got copies.”
And Koremitsu handed out another piece of paper.
Asai again grabbed that piece of paper, shredding it to pieces.
“I still have another here.”
Koremitsu said as he handed one copy after another over and over again.
Asai maintained her Siberian tundra-like eyes as she grabbed them and tore them up. At their feet were shreds of paper akin to snow.
After keeping this up for some time, Asai was starting to pant somewhat.
“Have you had enough?”
“What about you? Just give up already.”
“I have no idea why I have to look for a Tsuchinoko with you.”

Asa, Koremitsu is my friend here. He is here to help me fulfill the promise I made with you back then.”
Hikaru was beside Koremitsu, pleading with an ever earnest look.
Koremitsu too added seriously.
“I'm here looking for you because I'm Hikaru's friend. Hikaru has a promise with you he wants to fulfill so much he knelt down in front of me with his head down. Hikaru's really troubled that he could not go look for the Tsuchinoko with you!”
Koremitsu exclaimed, and were cold blades were flashing in Asai's expression, her eyes filled with cold hatred.
It had always been like this.
Whenever Koremitsu insisted that he was Hikaru's friend, Asai would give Koremitsu a look that practically expressed her intent to kill him.
Standing tall on the scattered pieces of paper, she retorted coldly with a voice as icy as a blizzard.
“There is no way you can be Hikaru's friend!”
Koremitsu, incensed by Asai's loud outcry, gave an absolute zero stare back, yelling,
“No matter what you think, I'm Hikaru's friend!”
Both sides looked completely agitated, sparks ostensibly about to fly, and at that moment,
An annoyed voice of one being out of patience could be heard.
A woman dressed in an apron poked her head out from behind the door of the elongated wooden shed
“Please do not leave your waste in front of our house door. It is a hassle having to clean it up.”
Both Koremitsu and Asai were rendered speechless at the same time.
“Please pardon me.”
Asai's cheeks were beetroot from the humiliation.
“Sorry. I'll clean it up.”
Koremitsu instinctively replied.
Asai too helped gather the scattered shreds of paper. While she did so, “It is your fault”, she said with much hatred.
“What? Isn't it your fault for tearing the paper up?”
Koremitsu retorted back,
Ah, please do not quarrel now.”
And Hikaru clapped his hands together, begging them.
With the screech of the wooden door, the front door of the residence was opened.
While squatting down, Asai suddenly lifted his head.
And Koremitsu too did likewise.
Standing in front of the door was a small old lady dressed in a refreshing onion green kimono and a silver sash, looking very posh. That woman had her back straightened beautifully, and remained serene as she gave Koremitsu a reminiscing look, saying,

“Are you the one who calls himself Mr Hikaru's friend?”

◇ ◇ ◇

The blue and purple Morning Glories were blooming wildly in the large garden.

The pillars and floors were covered with young green vines, and there were round Morning Glory flowers on them. At the far end of the garden was a space cordoned by stone, and besides the little shrubs growing there, they were all Morning Glories. Even on the porch, there were Morning Glories. Some of them had sharp petals, swaying with the breeze like a goldfish tail. There were also weird shapes too.

(Are these all Morning Glories? Amazing...)

Koremitsu walked down the corridor leading to the room, and once he saw the garden scenery from there, he was left breathless.

He was the complete opposite of Hikaru in that he neither loved nor had any interest in flowers, but even his eyes were inadvertently mesmerized when he saw the bright, proud Morning Glories lined in rows.

The lady who warned Koremitsu and Asai “Please do not leave your waste in front of our house door” served them tea. Though the tea was accompanied with pickled turnip and cucumber, Koremitsu, who disliked sweet things, was really grateful for it.

Asai sat beside Koremitsu, looking extremely displeased as she sat on her knees, her back straightened. Facing her was the old lady who invited them in, now seated opposite them.

Her body was small, but for some inexplicable reason, she was a lady with much presence. Her upright posture and her sharp mouth were the reasons a firm presence could be felt from her.

Her name was Orime Gonomiya. She was the master of this Asagao Residence, and was living with her grandson and his wife.

“Mr Hikaru would appear here suddenly ever since a young age, climbing onto the porch with his hands supporting his chin. He really looked blissful there, like he met a lover or something similar.”

She narrowed her eyes lovingly, reminiscingly.

As Orime had said, Hikaru was seat at the porch, his hands supporting his cheeks, his lips slightly closed as he stared at every single Morning Glory with a gentle expression. The gentle light brown hair gave off a glittering gold look due to refraction, and his originally white skin was paler, his lips slightly red, his limbs slender, his androgynous appearance tender, akin to an angel.

“Mr Hikaru was a kind obedient boy with such a clear look in his eyes...I really hoped to meet him again this year, but alas, he died at such a young age.”

Orime's expression gloomed.

Asai too clenched her hands that were placed on her knees, her eyes bleak as she looked down. Upon seeing this, Koremitsu felt his inner heart sink, and felt extremely solitary.
(Hikaru, you're here right now...looking at the flowers over there with that ever delighted face of yours. Nobody else can see you right now...)
As he thought about it, his nasals started to agitate.
(Damn it, the tears are about to fall from my eyes.)
How exactly was he supposed to contain these tears?
He widened his eyes with all his might to prevent Asai from noticing it.
Orime continued sadness.
“Mr Hikaru's father will definitely come here once he loses his authority. To reminisce over Mr Hikaru, and also to reminisce his most beloved.”
(Most beloved, as in Hikaru's mother...is it?)
Not his real wife, but his mistress.
There was the photo of the young lady holding a baby Hikaru when Koremitsu visited his room. She was a beauty practically of the same mold as Hikaru himself.
Hikaru never mentioned anything about his family. However, after his mother died, his father took a young Hikaru under his care; as Orime had said, one reason may be because of how Hikaru's father had so much affectionate love for the woman who gave birth to Hikaru.
Even if that person was his mistress.
Suddenly, Asai, who had been looking somber all this while, silently lifted her head.
“We lost the Paulownia flower, but uncle still has the Wisteria flower.”
She fixated her stare seriously at Orime, her tone filled with decisive will.
“To allow the Wisteria uncle so loves to continue to bloom, I will wish to have a word from you, Lady Orime.”
(She called him
Koremitsu was truly shock to notice that Asai, who would treat her upperclassman Tōjō on equal standings, being so humble here.
(Hey, this old granny is that amazing?)
He wanted to ask Hikaru, but the latter was looking at Asai so worriedly, or rather, perturbed.
Orime quietly answered,
“I do apologize, Miss Asai, but I have reiterated many times that I am already advanced in age, ailing in health, and I cannot be of as much use as you think.”
But Asai would not give up.
Her stern expression caused the mood to become abnormally tense as she appealed,
“No. Surely there is no one around who does not know of the 'Asagao Princess'.”

(Asagao Princess? I heard her mention it on the phone. What kind of person is she exactly? Besides, what does she mean by getting the word? What exactly is Saiga planning here?)
When he tried to eavesdrop, his body naturally leaned forward.
At this moment, the breeze blowing from the porch blew at Koremitsu copy of the schedule.
Asai did not spare any piece that was given to her, and this was the last copy left.
This last copy slipped from Koremitsu's hands, and fluttered to Orime's knee.
“Ack!” Koremitsu opened his mouth in a startled manner, Asai turned her face over to him, and Hikaru widened his eyes.
Orime picked it up with her slender, wrinkled hand, and had a look at it.
She widened her eyes inexplicably, looking somewhat bemused too. After reading it, she lifted her wrinkled face.
“Is this your work, Mr Akagi?”
“Ah, yeah.”
“I do apologize for letting you see such an absurd thing, Lady Orime. Those are things of folly he wrote.”
(Hey, why're you apologizing now, Saiga? Calling them absurd too.)
Just when Koremitsu was unable to vent his anger, Orime marveled quietly, “Those are nice words...”
Asai was startled.
Koremitsu was stupefied to realize that he was praised, his eyes widened.
Hikaru too looked as if he was the one being praised as he beamed.
Orime then analyzed each word, one at a time, as she read the words on the schedule.
“The lines are straight and firm, and they really are pretty words all around. It is a rarity among the current generation of youths to be able to write such beautiful words.”
Not knowing how to respond to the praises, Koremitsu's cheeks gradually reddened.
“Ah, well, my grandfather opened a calligraphy class, and I practiced there since young.”
He muttered.
Orime nodded, “I see. It is no wonder then that those words are nice.” she repeated it over again, and Koremitsu's cheek got redder.
Beside him, Asai curled her lips unhappily.
Mdm Orime is interested in calligraphy. She herself has quite the nice handwriting, has contributed to the development of it in many ways, and even acts as a judge. You really are amazing to be recognized by such a person, Koremitsu.”
Even Hikaru had his chest puffe proudly as he said.
(Shut up, you idiot. Damn it, this is embarrassing.)
“Mr Akagi, if it is convenient, do you mind writing something now?”

After hearing these words, Koremitsu looked anxious and Asai narrowed her eyes.
“Please excuse me.”
Though they were in the house, a young female dressed in a bright miniskirt, ostensibly about to head outside rudely opened the door as she walked in.
“It is time for your medicine, grandmother.”
Though she did somewhat crude, she did watch Orime finish all the medicinal soup in the bowl.
“Now then, it's about time for your rest. You'll collapse if you force yourself too much.”
Though she did show a proper choice of words, she gave Koremitsu and Asai a look of annoyance, indicating for them to leave.
Orime too looked conflicted, her expression somewhat unnatural.
“Well, it is that late already.”
“Sorry to bother you for such a long time. I shall return to visit when Lady Orime gets better.”
Asai lowered her head politely.
The woman who served them tea stared at Asai with spite, and Orime smiled quietly.
“Why yes. Come by to visit when you have time. You have to come here too, Mr Akagi.”
She turned her face over to Koremitsu.
And Asai raised her eyebrows in disdain.
Koremitsu panicked in the face of Orime's unexpected goodwill, and answered,
“Ah, yeah.”
He assumed Hikaru would be a chatterbox over Koremitsu receiving such praises, but Hikaru in turn had his stare fixated on the woman who served Orime tea, looking somewhat concerned as he frowned.
Having just exited the Gonomiya residence, Asai showed all his anxiety, her shoulders quivering, her fists clenched as she bit her lower lip.
“Hey, you done with your business? If you have nothing, go look for the Tsuchinoko with me.”
Koremitsu was trying to communicate with Asai normally on his part.
Ahh, Koremitsu, saying such a thing now is...”
Just when Hikaru panicked and was about to intervene, Asai stamped hard at his foot with her all might.
His right foot was ostensibly aimed at, and after his foot got stomped hard by it, the pain continued to reverberate in his mind.
“I do not have even 0.01 second to play with a wild dog.”
She retorted with words akin to icy blades, and strode off while leaving Koremitsu behind as the latter hugged his foot.
“Damn it—! You're not being cute at all! My foot hurts!!”

While Koremitsu yelled with teary eyes, Hikaru floated about gently, his hand on his forehead,
Even if it had not been Asa, I suppose most girls would have been angry at such a scenario.”
◇ ◇ ◇
The sun was still dissipating heat on his way back.
In response to Asai leaving him alone, Hikaru could only explain the situation with a solemn look,
Currently, there is an intense struggle amongst the Mikados between the first and second wife of my father. Most of the reason, I feel, is because father's illness has yet to improve for the better...”
“Your dad's sick? In what way?”
His heart is a little uncomfortable...he did do a surgery two years ago, but there is a chance of it being a relapse.”
Hikaru's voice sank.
“That is really worrying...”
Though Hikaru nodded calmly, he would not mention much about his own family, and thus, Koremitsu could not tell how exactly Hikaru felt about his father's illness.
After some silence, Hikaru continued to explain,
The ones supporting the first wife form the Rose faction, and the ones supporting the second wife form are the Wisteria faction. Asa is in the latter group.”
And thus, she needed to recruit supporters for the second wife. The Mikados had much prestige and authority, and the Gonomiyas had much power over the Mikados, so she wanted to recruit them.
“What, that sort of thing isn't something a high school student should be doing.”
Koremitsu was dumbfounded.
Was there no way to enjoy herself? Like the seaside, fireworks or a concert?
Well, he himself had no right to say that about others...
(Like me, she doesn't have friends either...it looks like she got into a quarrel with Aoi...)
Hikaru's eyes betrayed some sorrow.
Being the head of the Gonomiya household, Mdm Orime is known to be an influential person, and that is not all. Her word has a deeper meaning.”
“Eh? Word?”
The current head of the Mikados, previous, and before that all had a word sent from Mdm Orime, and they framed it up to preserve those words. Thus, the words Lady Orime gives is like obtaining a seal of being the head of the Mikados. Of course, this originates from Lady Orime's wisdom and etiquette. The words given from the 'Asagao Princess' still plays a major role in the Mikados' power landscape.”
“Saiga did mention about that Asagao Princess you said too, saying that thereis no one who does not know of the 'Asagao Princess'.”

The Gonomiya residence is filled with Morning Glory flowers, no? In respect of Orihime of Tanabata, they call her as the 'Asagao Princess'. The Morning Glory, or Asagao, was a species of flowers imported from China at the end of the Nara era, and the Chinese called them qianniuhua, the Ipomoea nil type of Morning Glory. Asagao was later called the Morning Glory too, and in the flow of time, Orihime was dubbed the Asagao Princess out of respect."
However, it was unknown when people started calling Orime the 'Asagao Princess' out of respect.
The original species of Morning Glories are blue. It is the first to open its eyes at dawn, opening its petals with regal while every other person is still sound asleep. It straightens its back, working hard seriously, and proudly shows off its proud blue flower like a pure, riveting girl—it does match Mdm Orime in this way, and also Asa."
The gloomy expression Hikaru betrayed before gradually brightned.
He spoke lovingly with a gentle voice, muttering,
Asa too is like the Morning Glory. Like Mdm Orime, she is another 'Asagao Princess'."
Normally, Koremitsu would feel frustrated and not pay much attention whenever Hikaru praised those flowers and women effervescently, but this time, he inexplicably found himself agreeing with Hikaru's view.
Asai did seem similar to the Morning Glory.
(That girl's definitely not willing to let others see her wake up.)
She would wake up earlier than anyone else, comb her head, sort everything out, and begin work with a refreshed look.
I woke up too late now. It has nothing to do with you."
He did hear such harsh words before—
Though that was the case, Koremitsu did do an observation diary of the Morning Glories for summer vacation during his elementary school days. He missed out on the important part about the Morning Glories blooming as he overslept, and when he woke up, the Morning Glories had already opened their blue flowers, and Koremitsu stomped on the ground in angry.
"Well, to put it, I don't really know Saiga much as a proper High School student, but anyway, I'll focus on fulfilling your promise."
Can Hikaru's wish ever be fulfilled?
Upon thinking about that, Koremtisu lifted his head.
"I'm going to hassle her all the way. I'm going to drag her along to look for Tsuchinoko."
After answered his, Koremitsu showed a smile that was totally not a smile, one more terrifying than a ghost, a highly dreaded look amongst his schoolmates.

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 3

(Someone, just drag this wild dog to the veterinarian.)
Koremitsu mentioned about going to catch Tsuchinokos in front of the Gonomiya residence, and after a few days of laughable attempts to invite her, Asai's irritation reached its limit.
(All those things about a Tsuchinoko theme park, fishing for kappa, exchanging messages with UFOs are all things of the past, and I don't believe in any of them now. You should know about that without me saying that. Or are you so much of an imbecile lacking in common sense?)
At this point, Asai should be pulling back the people of the Wisteria faction who have casted their supported for Kazuaki, and continued to visit Orime, trying her best to convince the latter.
And right beside the extremely tense Asai was that wild dog, who would slouch his back and sit cross-legged, just relaxing and spending his time there. Whenever they talked about Orime, he would call her 'granny'. A little while later, he would say 'this pickled turnip is really nice', putting the pickles that came with the tea as he chewed on them hard, making a noise. Furthermore, he unabashedly asked for another bowl, irritating Asai's nerves to no end.
And more infuriating for her was that while Koremitsu remained like this, Orime simply smiled at him.
“Mr. Hikaru really likes the pickles back then. When I asked him 'Is it not boring to leave your sweets at home to come here?', he would say 'I can eat sweets when I am outside, but you do have such beautiful flowers here'. If I were not so old then, I would have fallen for him.”
She recalled with a reminiscencing look.
“That Hikaru already could say such things when he was a brat.”
“Yes. It should be said that all the girls would captivate Mr. Hikaru. Even at parties, the atmosphere would gradually buzz whenever he appeared.”
“That guy only has his looks and mouth as his selling points.”
“Oh dear, that is harsh coming from Mr. Hikaru's friend.”
Even when Koremitsu was gruff and coarse in his speech, it was a refreshing sight to Orime.
And the most unbearable thing for Asai was that Orime called him 'Mr. Hikaru's friend.'.
“There is nothing more delightful than Mr. Hikaru's friend coming here to play, to recall bits and pieces about him, and talk about him together.”
After hearing such an earnest mutter, Asai nearly ceased to breathe in her anger.
(Lady Orime has actually recognized that wild dog as Hikaru's friend?)
It was truly unbelievable to her.

How could such a wretched, unkempt, simple-minded, shameless man be Hikaru's friend?
It was not Aoi alone who felt this way; even Orime too!
(This is unforgivable!)
The cold killing intent and hatred lingered in her heart from the first moment they met. What of Hikaru's representative? What about looking for the Tsuchinoko with her in Hikaru's place? She really wanted to kill him.
It was true that she did make such a promise with Hikaru a long time ago. It was during the winter of her 3
grade that she learned that Santa Claus was really her parents. It was a humiliation she gnashed her teeth over, but Asai, unwilling to lose, had a strong desire to personally witness whether the unknown creatures truly existed on this world, and fueled by it, came up with a summer adventure plan with Hikaru, then a 4
(We really were children back then. Whether it was me, or Hikaru...)
Right, that was merely some immature words. The most important promise she made with Hikaru definitely was not something so dreamy, so idealistic.
(My promise with Hikaru is more sacred, stronger than that. This is not something a wild dog acting as a representative can do, and I do not wish for that dog to fulfill it.)
Whenever Koremitsu appeared in front of her unabashedly as Hikaru's friend, Asai would think that it was a sacrilege to Hikaru. Even so, she could not reproach Koremitsu so openly in front of Orime. She recalled the era names and the periodic element in her mind over and over again as she straightened her waist, her eyes icy as she forced herself to endure. Once she stepped outside, she growled,
“Do not come here, and do not get in my way. Do not enter my sights. You should simply die, wild dog.”
The abusive words akin to an ice pillar came out of her frozen lips in such a manner.
Any other man who was given an icy look from Asai and insulted as a lowlife would have vanished without a trace. At this moment, Koremitsu took a step forward, following up on Asai's words,
“Yeah, I'll vanish. That'll be once your promise with Hikaru is done! So then, let's hurry and start looking for the Tsuchinoko.”
“The Tsuchinoko is simply a creature that was imagined. It does not exist anywhere on this world.”
“This isn't something someone wishing to breed Tsuchinokos and create a Tsuchinoko theme park should say, Asa.”
“If you call me Asa again, I shall call the police.”
“I'll come by tomorrow again, Asa!”
“Hello there, is that the police? I have spotted a suspicious being, and I wish for you to arrest
. Yes. He is approximately 16 years ago, a man with savage looking eyes, resembling a wild dog with red fur.”

But no matter how she obstructed him and reported him, he would simply appear nonchalantly in front of Asai the next day, asking Asai out to look for the Tsuchinoko, to exchange messages with UFOs.
“If you keep hesitating now, summer vacation's going to end!”
That truly was the case.
If she could not convince the Asagao Princess while the Morning Glories were in bloom, she would be in much trouble.
She was holding onto a trump card—
At this point, only a few people knew of it. However, when it came to Autumn, the situation would change drastically, and she would not be able to hide it anymore.
At that moment, what sort of action would Kazuaki and his mother Hiroka take? Whenever she contemplated about this, her temples will ache. If she could not erect a defense against them,
And when it came to winter—
The pale face of the now deceased Hikaru, overwhelmed with despair, would appear in front of her eyes, and her body would shiver from the cold.
Hikaru's eyes were like a dark, bottomless abyss—
Asa...like what everyone else had said, I might be a person who should not be born on this world after all...
That parched voice—
Perhaps she would not be able to protect it after all.
Regarding Hikaru's secret.
The evidence of Hikaru's guilt.
(No, I have to protect it.)
Because I am the only one who had seen Hikaru giving such a tragic look—
She had no time to waste with this wretched, pretentious wild dog.
And after sorting her emotions, she stood in front of the Gonomiya residence.
To avoid Koremitsu on this day, she specifically chose to visit in the afternoon.
As she expected, Koremitsu did come by in the morning, and left thereafter.
It was a lowly tactic of hers she had to take, to allow that wild dog to be alone with Orime.
(I have to get the promise of the word while that man is not here...)
Just as she contemplated in her mind.
The chatter could be heard.
The servants could be heard whispering.
And she nonchalantly moved to the Japanese sliding screen, her ears eavesdropping.
“I heard that the Lady had an argument with the Young Lord. The Young Lord wishes to finance his investments, but the Lady denied him and was unwilling to talk about it.”
“How many times has it been? The Young Lord should just stop already. The Lady herself is very strict on even her relatives, and he should learn that.”

“But it seems that the Lady really likes that red-haired delinquent boy who has been coming by recently. I do not know her interests at all.”
Of course, it was because she led such a wild dog to Orime that the latter's interests and dignity was being questioned, no? There was a need to pull Koremitsu away from Orime after all—
“But that boy with scary looking eyes is Miss Asai's lover, no?”
Her thoughts were interrupted by this sudden, unexpected line.
“I heard that he declared himself to be her fiance. They both were arguing all day long, but they definitely love each other within their hearts, right?”
“Yeah. It is hard for us ordinary people to understand why such a gruff—no, it will be nearly impossible to be Miss Asai's husband if it is not someone who dares to challenge her head on.”
By the time she realized it, her shoulders and hands were quivering. Her body was cold, her stomach churning, feeling nauseous—
She just experienced an amazing amount of humiliation. It would be great if it was just a hallucination on her part, but it was not; She heard every single word clearly, and the proof was the chill on her body that would not cease.
A groan filled with humiliation came out of her lips,
“Calling me and that wild dog lovers.”
♢ ♢ ♢
Koremitsu suddenly shivered.
“What's with the cold.”
He was standing in front of the cooler; perhaps it was due to the seat below him.
It was the afternoon. After his visit at the Gonomiya residence, he decided to visit the cafe Aoi worked at on his way back. On this day, she again was dressed in a navy blue one-piece uniform with a white frilly apron over it, holding a silver tray as she served tea.
Whenever a customer came in, she would raise her voice, saying 'welcome' with a smile, though she would give a forlorn, gloomy look at times
Whenever she received a message, Aoi would immediately open it to affirm.
—Sorry. I mishandled the phone.
She would softly reply, and then say that she was busy before hanging up.
Feeling a little concerned, Koremitsu went to visit her at her workplace.
When she saw him however, she looked somewhat perturbed, stiffening with a pale look,
“E-erm…I am still busy here.”
Even when Koremitsu went to talk to her, Aoi would fidget and avert her eyes, scampering away.
“Did something happen between you and Saiga?”
When he asked this,
“No, that is not the case…”
Her voice gradually softened, before becoming silent.
Hikaru too was exceptionally concerned by Aoi's disparate behavior, and inadvertently frowned,

“Hey, what do you think?”
Koremitsu secretly glance aside, asking Hikaru,
I can be sure that Miss Aoi is frustrated by something…but she is quite the stubborn person herself…it will be difficult trying to extract information from her under such a situation.”
“Not even you can help?”
If it is me, I would say that instead of my senses sharpening when it comes to her, I have been infuriating her all this while.”
He showed an unhindered grimace. Though this person could make people fall heads over heels for him, he was totally of no use here.
In that case, he had to look for Miss Sueko, who was arranged by Tōjō to work with Aoi and act as her bodyguard, and try to ask something from her.
“Hyag! Wh-what?”
She stammered.
“I-i-i-it's nothing. Miss Aoi doesn't know that I'm hired by Young Master Tōjō here, and if it's me, I'm working hard here, you know? Just tell this to Young Master Tōjō himself. This beautiful and capable Miss Sueko is still undertaking such a difficult duty, so please give me a pay rise.”
She whispered,
“If I continue to talk with you like this, Miss Aoi will get suspicious and not talk with me. My identity now is a rich princess from a noble girls school after all.”
And after saying that, she left.
What rich princess of a noble girls school? Can't you just look at how old you are now? Even if you don't talk with me, you're being rather suspicious yourself.
As he wondered about this, he wanted to vent somewhat.
Speaking of which, he had yet to see Tōjō over the past few days.
That person doted so much on Aoi that he hired a bodyguard to watch over her, and yet was a useless person who could not do anything at the crucial moment. Unwilling to vent out at this point, Koremitsu kept his frustration within.
Koremitsu, your appearance is a little…”
Hikaru sounded a little concerned.
The other customers are all terrified of you. I know that you are worried about Miss Aoi, and I do have the same feeling…”
“Ugh, brooding tentatively alone doesn't match my personality at all. Damn it, I better ask Aoi again.”
Just when Koremitsu was about to get up,
“I suppose that should be enough.”
There was an icy voice behind him.
He turned around, and found a girl with refreshing clear eyes. This girl was a customer who often visited this shop, always reading a Western language book at the wall, the girl Hikaru called Miss Mint.

“Girls do have moments when they wish to be left alone. She will not be moved even if a boy shows concern for her.”
She spoke in a calm, serene tone, and vanished behind the door leading to the toilets.
(Did she say that because she knew my situation…?)
Till this point, Koremitsu had yet to figure out the true identity of this girl who said such meaningful things. Hikaru however seemed to have picked up on something.
Perhaps it is as Miss Mint said. Let us simply look at Miss Aoi for a little while.”
Though Hikaru had said so, Koremitsu still felt disgruntled within, and wanted to set aside the cafe issue first.
Girls do have moments when they wish to be left alone.
The words were said with an icy tone, and it overlapped not only with Aoi's situation, but also with Honoka, who had been acting strangely recently, throbbing his heart.
I think it's better for us to see each other less often.
He never met her ever since they went their separate ways at the library, and when he called her, she never picked up her phone.
(How's…she doing recently?)
◇ ◇ ◇
(Mr Akagi may not be feeling happy at the moment…)
Aoi watched Koremitsu leave the shop as the latter scowled, her heart ostensibly ripped apart.
(It is rare that Mr Akagi came all the way here to visit me because he is worried about me.)
However, she still could not tell Koremitsu.
If he were to show concern to her, she would spill out everything regarding Asa.
(I do not want to let Mr Akagi know that Asa has been looking down on me.)
She recalled the event that transpired a few days ago, when she brought the muffins to school to meet Asai, and when she heard the conversation in front of the student council office, her body inadvertently shivered.
Asai was not alone; she was with Tsuyako.
She probably is observing that Miss Aoi who continues to rely on you, Miss Asai, and even said that if something happens to Miss Aoi, she will inform you first.
Tsuyako did mention that Asai did arrange for someone to watch over Aoi at the cafe, and Asai did not deny that.
She merely replied coolly
It will be too late if something happens to Aoi.
The chilling thing was the words Tsuyako said thereafter,
Miss Asai, you are always pretending to protect Miss Aoi. In fact, you are looking down on Miss Aoi, am I correct?

The muffin Aoi made specially for Asai, the bag of muffins tied with the cute ribbon for Asai, fell at her feet.
Her mind was a complete blank as to how she could pick up the muffins, how she could leave without Asai detecting her.
By the time she realized it, she was already moving outside the school, spacing out.
(Asa has been looking down on me?)
(Has Asa always been like that.)
Tsuyako's words continued to repeat in her mind.
Ever since she was born, Asai had always taken care of Aoi no matter how difficult it may be, and the former always had this thought.
The most shocking was that even Aoi could not deny such a thought.
She even felt that it was to be expected that Asai would have such a thought.
(I am useless by myself after all. I cannot do anything well without Asai around; I always rely on her.)
Asai's spy surely must be in the shop at this point. She had originally suspected Sueko, who had always helped her out whenever she had issues, and Sueko in turn widened her eyes, flailing her hand as she concluded,
I-I-I do not know anything about that. I dare swear to God that I was not hired by your friend Miss Asai to spy on you. Anyway, I do not have any relation with that lady called Asai. This is really the truth; if I dare lie here, I shall swallow a thousand needles
Aoi felt ashamed for suspecting Sueko in the first place, and immediately apologized.
It-it is alright. I was not hired by Miss Asai to spy on you anyway. We are still friends.
Though Sueko did say this, she seemed a little perturbed by this, and had been somewhat distant from Aoi recently.
Her paternal cousin Shungo, who had been kind to her, seemed to be in some trouble, and did not appear recently.
Also, Aoi had no one to talk with regarding Asai.
In fact, she really wanted to rely on Koremitsu.
(Mr Akagi is really kind, always willing to listen to my troubles, and would even console me.)
But if she were to do so, the more Asai would look down upon her, and even Koremitsu might think like Asai, that Aoi was a troublesome person.
It was the beginning of summer vacation when she coincidentally met Koremitsu's classmate, Honoka Shikibu, and they ended up having tea together.
Aoi was a person every other person knew of, but this was the first time she had tea alone with a stranger.
However, this person was always with Koremitsu. She had such beautiful legs and a feisty look; Aoi was concerned by this girl all this while.

At the cafe, Aoi ordered a milk tea filled with honey, while Honoka ordered an expresso. Thinking that she was being childish, and embarrassed about it, Aoi hastily corrected herself, saying, “Please give me a cup of coffee instead, without sugar and milk'.
Once their orders were taken, both of them stammered somewhat.
Your Highness Aoi, I want to know what do you think about Akagi?
I think Akagi doesn't suit you, Your Highness Aoi~ Akagi's crude and poor at talking. I don't think he fits you as a Princess.
She continued to say bad things about Koremitsu, giving a pretentious tone of understanding him better than anyone else. Aoi's felt hazy within, somewhat anxious.
Mr Akagi is a kind person, a marvellous person. It is simply that everyone else does not know about it
She argued back.
And after expressing some shock, Honoka raised her eyebrows, her eyes affirmed as she said,
I-I know that Akagi's a good person too.
Honoka wanted to convey to Aoi that the latter was not the only one who realized Koremitsu's charm.
To Aoi, Honoka herself was filled with charm unlike Aoi, was definitely a person who could think on her own, and was a strong, amazing person.
That she was someone of equal standing to Koremitsu.
Koremitsu too probably loved Honoka for how she was. Whenever he talked to Honoka, he seemed to be so at ease, so calm.
(I cannot talk to Mr Akagi about Asa after all.)
She did not want Koremtisu to think of her as being different from Honoka, a girl who always has to rely on others.
She did not want Koremitsu to look down upon her.
She endured the emotions that were about to collapse as she slowly left the cafe—
“It has been a while, little Aoi.”
The voice as sweet as Hikaru's rang at her ears.
And she felt her mind freeze.
The slender bespectacled youth stood in front of Aoi, brazenly smiling away.
It was Hikaru's half-brother, Kazuaki—!
Aoi recalled what Kazuaki did at the countryside villa, and felt her disgust and fear throbbing her throat, her body cringing.
Kazuaki was pretending to be kind, ostensibly forgetting what happened back then.
“Asa will know if I look for you in the shop. It looks that I will have to get past Asa if I wish to talk to you, Aoi.”
After hearing these words, Aoi's movements stopped.
She should be running away as fast as she could at this point, but her feet could not move.

Even if she was not aware of the ways of the world, Aoi could understand that Asai sent someone to watch over her so as to ward the latter from Kazuaki.
(But I started working part-time to protect myself using my own strength.)
She tried her best to stand up straight, lifting her head at Kazuaki.
It seemed her resistance was amusing to Kazuaki, ostensibly to be expected, as the eyes beneath the latter's spectacles narrowed.
And then, he bared his true nature as the spider, speaking with viscous tone,
“Do you know, little Aoi? The Mr Akagi you so love right now is flirting with Asa~”
♢ ♢ ♢
To the Purple Princess.
My close friend and I fell in love with the same guy! (
That person is the playful kid from the next class, G. The way he shoots the soccer ball into the net when we have PE class together is so amazing, I thought.
And then, I started observing him for quite some time. I think I may have fallen in love with him.
But I'm so shy that I lied to my best friend, saying that I don't have anyone I like.
After that, right before the summer vacation, my close friend M said that she fell in love with G, and hopes to have me patch them up together!
∑(--□--|||)
I just answered with 'Eh~', and she said to me 'please, I can only request this from you', repeating it over and over again. I had no choice, so I could only agree.
Purple Princess, what do I do now?
Please help me here.(; ^ ;)
From Sunglasses Panda”
To Sunglasses Panda,
It must be tough on you, falling in love with the same guy your good friend is in love with. I really~understand your feelings right now, Sunglasses Panda. o(i
You can't betray your close friend, but you can't cut away your thoughts about him.
My friend is a good person too, always relying on me, or maybe she doesn't have much initiative herself('__`
) I actually told her that I never thought much about him, and even said that we should keep our distance from each other. It was rare that we managed to get along so well; ahhhhh, I'm really a big idiot here!!
(((p(≥□≤))))
Seriously, what do I do now(·/□\·)”
“Eh—I'm not replying to her at all! I'm just discussing this with her! What am I doing here!!?”—

Honoka immediately deleted all the words on the screen, and slumped her shoulders.
It was the afternoon of a hot, scorching summer day.
She was strolling about the residential area, updating her blog, but was perplexed as she felt she was not being her usual self.
Before knowing Koremitsu, Honoka was hailed by everyone else to be the love expert, was able to give fast and accurate responses to all the troubles the girls have expressed, and had received much gratitude.
Ever since she started conversing with Koremitsu however, Honoka became a girl with her own troubles.
But even so, there had been a little development, and she did fulfill the wish of going to the pool before.
(Has Michiru fallen in love with Akagi?)
Why, back when Michiru asked her '
you do like Mr Akagi after all
', did she reply with '
that's not the case
'? Even stating that she was just ordinary classmates with Koremitsu, that she had high standards.
It was too late when Michiru raised her moist eyes.
Th-then, it's alright if I fall in love with Mr Akagi, right?”
It was a voice filled with decisiveness.
Her cheeks were slightly dyed pink.
It was the first time Honoka had seen Michiru give such a serious look, even though she had been close friends with Michiru since their 9
Normally, she would tie her hair in braids, wearing spectacles. She was never so pretty, and never attended any mixed dates.
She was a little introverted, would always work hard, but ended up making a mess out of matters, often panicked, and would often be downhearted.
And this close friend of hers undid her braids, removed her glasses, dressed in gentle fabrics and bright clothing, smiling shyly at Koremitsu.
So Michiru was such a beautiful person after all.
She thoroughly changed her image for the man she liked, a girl filled with feminine charms.
And because of love, Michiru became so beautiful. As a friend, Honoka was really delighted.
(But to support Akagi and Michiru's love, uuu, I can't do it after all.)
However, this was a fact she could not tell Michiru directly.
(What kind of a love expert am I here? I am so half-hearted when it comes to love and friendship; how useless I am.)
What was worrying to Honoka was not simply Michiru herself.
The reason why Honoka started talking with Koremitsu was because of that cute doll-like upperclassman who was the start of everything, and the image of her appeared in their minds.
Aoi Saotome—

The one Koremitsu first liked, the famed princess.
When she had tea with Aoi during the summer vacation, they conversed with each other with tense feelings, and Honoka thoroughly realized it.
That Aoi had feelings for Koremitsu beyond that of acquaintanceship.
Most likely, those feelings were of the same kind as Honoka's—
It is simply that everyone else does not know about it
With her determined expression, Aoi was wholeheartedly devoted to shielding Koremitsu.
And Honoka's chest tightened at that moment, 'I-I know that Akagi's a good person too'.
As compared to the princess Aoi, she was closer to Akagi , and she knew how he was like normally.
But when she saw Aoi order the milk tea with honey with a naturally cute, girlish look, she felt as if she had lost.
And then, she changed her order to coffee, without any milk or sugar, inadvertently let out a comment 'bitter!'. Her shy, blushing cheeks made her looked really cute too.
Honoka herself ordered a cream cocoa with marshmallow added, and the sweetness in the mouth was too much even for her.
(Akagi...really likes those girls that give the urge of needing protecting protection after all...Miss Kanai is that kind of person too...)
She lost to Michiru, she lost to Her Highness Aoi, and she lost to herself.
When she analyzed it this way, she felt more devastated as a result. For some reason however, she found that her legs have dragged her to Koremitsu's house.
(I remember it's nearby...he said that his grandfather opens a calligraphy class...)
“Wai—wh-what am I doing here exactly?”
The way she went about in circles in front of another person's house was worse than her spying on Koremitsu going to Aoi's part-time workplace.
Clearly, her stalker tendencies were getting exacerbated.
(Right. When Akagi caught me that time, he really scolded me good.)
She could not do such a foolish thing again.
(Calm down, Honoka What you are doing now is lowering your value as a woman. Right, that is what the Purple Princess will advise. I should return home right now, take a cold shower, and cool my head off.)
But if she were to stay at home, she would continue to think about Michiru and Aoi, and would end up more depressed. She had told Koremitsu that they should keep their distance from each other, but she really, really, really regretted it—
“I-I'm just going to check out his house. Once I do that, I'll go back. I can't meet Akagi coincidentally like this...ev-even if it's probably alright, but it feels like I want Akagi to see me, wearing such skimpy shorts...no no no, this is about a girl's personal appearance...if my skirt flips and I show my panda panties, I'll just be shooting myself in the foot...m-my underwear

today is rather mature too...ahh, it's not like I want to wear it for Akagi to see.”
She tried to defend herself as she whispered, large beads of sweat seeping out as she proceeded forward step by step.
“Erm...the door sign's on the street here...ah.”
She stopped in front of a wooden house surrounded by a thin wooden fence. There was the name 'Akagi' on the sign board, and upon seeing this, a shy, lonely, miserable feeling rose within her.
(I am an idiot...I'm not being calm at all.)
She felt the feelings churn within her; it was stinging, hurting.
(I really want to see Akagi once after all~)
She cupped her knees in front of the door, her eyes teary.
“Lapis, wait.”
A pure white cat suddenly rushed out from the door, and appearing immediately afterward was a cute young girl with black hair tied in twintails.
Her petite right hand was holding a beryl blue ribbon.
“It's rare that I want to tie a ribbon on you.”
The pretty girl puffed her cheeks, and was taken aback once she noticed Honoka.
“Ah, uu...”
And Honoka remained still there, her knees cupped.
The other girl had her lips curled into a frown.
Honoka's body cringed.
(I-I'm so hapless being in such a situation now. Now I'm all teary. I can't give any appropriate reason either.)
But even, as an older, amazing girl, she should be the one breaking the deadlock, and the moment she tried to speak up.
The pretty elementary girl, Shioriko Wakagi, had some intense skirmishes against Honoka at the pool and cafe during the first half of summer vacation, and it was unknown if she had some sympathy due to Honoka's appearance, but she turned her head aside, nonchalantly saying,
“...Come in.”
The white cat at Honoka's feet too did the same motion, purring coolly.
◇ ◇ ◇
“Aoi is frustrated because she has some argument with Saiga after all.”
He was on the way back, the sun sunset.
Koremitsu said with Hikaru by his side. As his expression was grimmer than usual, his already savage looks were more pronounced than usual. Furthermore, he was muttering to himself, and it was no wonder the passers-by were giving him strange looks.
However, Koremitsu did not put them to mind as his head was filled with Aoi's matter and Hikaru's request.
“Saiga had been too concerned about Aoi ; it's already weird that anyone can be with that Saiga for so long without getting annoyed in some way.”

he recalled the vicious words Asai said at the Gonomiya residence, and was really infuriated. Whenever she saw his human face, she would call him a wild dog, a brute, tell him to die, call a veterinarian and such.
“!! She's the collective consciousness of all evil! That cold blooded woman!”
Asai's words and actions were always accompanied with a cool tone and a contemptuous look, and Koremitsu recalled them all, his fury voltage continuing to increase.
His temples were pulsating, his head and ears burning, and even his breath was boiling.
“Amongst all the people I met till now, there's no doubt she's the one woman who annoys me to no end. I can call her the most sinister person in this world.”
And Hikaru continued to explain to Koremits,
Asa is a kind person, actually.”
“Huh? How?”
He exclaimed without thinking, raising his eyebrows, and Hikaru's expression became gloomier as a result.
It was true. When I was young and teased for being a mistress' son, Asa would always defend me.”
(…Oh, is that so?)
She would catch any weakness of those children that bullied me, warning them not to harass me, set traps, showing their underwear in front of others shamefully, reporting to the teachers when there were bad things happening, write anonymous letters to taunt others.”
She started writing anonymous messages to others ever since elementary school. What exactly,
(So Asa has been like this ever since young.)
Koremitsu cringed back in turn.
It is because of Asa that I was not bullied by others, but at the same time, Asa was feared by everyone else....”
Hikaru lowered his shoulders.
Whenever she sheltered me, Asa would be the bad person, and slowly, she became unable to smile. Her eyes got sharper too…until she became a girl who could not cry.”
His lowers eyes were gradually tinted with gloom, and upon seeing this, Koremitsu too felt moody within.
I could not cry, and Asa herself could not either. I made such a promise with her when we were young, and because of that promise, she continued to keep it even after I died. I did not want to make such a promise...”
The tragic words from his friend caused his inner heart to sink as well.
He recalled the 'promise' Hikaru made with Asai, the one he told Koremitsu.
The initial promise was to look for a Tsuchinoko with Asai, at a dawn when when the Morning Glories bloomed.
And the final promise was—
Since Hikaru cannot cry, I shall not cry either.

There was the one day where he saw the photo of the young Asai, Aoi and Hikaru together in Hikaru's apartment.
There was Aoi, biting her lips with her eyes teary, a beaming Hikaru giving an angelic smile in the middle, and a stoic, intelligent looking girl standing there. After hearing Hikaru's words, the calm voice of this girl continued to echo at Koremitsu's ears.
—I cannot cry.
—I will not cry either, definitely.
The faces of the young Asai and this current cold, aloof Asai overlapped each other's.
The sharp, blade-like eyes that stared right at Koremitsu.
(It requires a lot of determination…for a girl to decide never to cry…)
It definitely was not an easy thing to keep this promise.
Furthermore, their promise continued to last till this point, and yet she became the feared, talented and calculative student council president, Asai Saiga.
Hikaru, basked under the white light of sunset, lowered his eyes as he said in a dreamy voice,
All would be well…if …I could cry…”
His voice was filled with guilt,
If I could cry out loud, if Asa would come over and console me, and then end this promise…”
He lowered his head in self-loathing—
The knife that was cutting at Hikaru's inner heart was cutting at Koremitsu's chest at the same time.
It definitely was not an easy thing to get rid of the things he kept swallowed within his heart.
Just as Koremitsu could not smile, Hikaru could not cry.
If Koremitsu could smile on the night he watched his mother apologize over and over again as she cried, perhaps he would not be at the child's room, standing at the window, watching that frail body depart gradually.
Koremitsu himself did have this thought.
(But this is something that cannot be fixed. Thinking about this right now is not going to change anything.)
Right, it could not be helped, it was inevitable.
But even so, his chest was aching. Hikaru's regret filled Koremitsu's chest.
Without that promise, I suppose Asa will definitely be a good person with a radiant smile, maybe somewhat clumsy, somewhat impish, a popular posh woman who often smiles.”
“That's not the case.”
Both Koremitsu and Hikaru were pondering, but Koremitsu had to retort back at this point no matter what.
That Asai Saiga would never become a good person with a radiant smile, maybe sometimes clumsy, somewhat impish, a popular posh woman who often smiles.

But Asa would give her seat to the elderly on the train.”
“That is normal.”
When she sees an empty can on the floor, she will pick it up and throw it into the trash bing.”
“Those environmental volunteer uncles often clean up the places in front of the stations too, right?”
When she sees a lost boy crying, she would bring him to a nearby policeman to handle.”
“Didn't the boy cry because he saw Saiga's face?”
Anyway, Asa is a kind person beyond what her appearance lets on.”
Koremitsu felt his chest itch due to Hikaru's sorrowful, and beyond that, serious look.
(Don't show such an expression here.)
He murmured quietly.
And then, as he continued to walk, he whispered,
“I do have some grievances against Asai, but I definitely won't back uout midway through.”
Thank you, Koremitsu.”
The friend beside him whispered graciously,
Can you also convey to Asa 'I have been crying beside you by your pillow every night'?”
“No, she'll definitely beat me up before I can finish saying such suspicious words, like I'm possessed by a ghost or something.”
'Are you an idiot'?
He gave such an expression as he walked on weakly. The equivocal solitude that could be felt from the pale sky before the sunset accompanied the duo until his doorstep.
“I'm back.”
He pulled aside the sliding door of the corridor, saying brusquely.
He knelt down to untie his shoelaces, and a discrete set of footsteps could be heard approaching.
Shioriko would never be so meek.
He lifted his head, and found a pair of slender legs and shorts; he looked up, and found Honoka Shikibu dressed in a flowery apron, shyly looking at Koremitsu with her cheeks red.
“We-welcome back.”

◊ ◊ ◊

(Why is Shikibu at my house?)
Koremitsu looked perplexed.
The living room was filled with the kokeshi doll gift and the hanging scroll his grandfather wrote on; his grandfather Masakaze, aunt Koharu, foster sister Shioriko, and classmate Honoka was seated around the table with Koremitsu.

Koharu and Masakaze did not seem too pleased about this, but it did not mean they were angry; this was their usual expression after all.
Shioriko too curled her lips into a frown.
“Miss Shikibu was cupping her knees in front of the house like a scaredy-cat, so I went to protect her.”
She spoke, obviously sounding very displeased,
“I-I'm not a scaredy cat...I-I just had heatstroke.”
Honoka cringed her shoulders back as she whispered.
“I see, so you accidentally got heatstroke in front of our house? Anyway, how long are you going to wear the apron? Are you emphasizing yourself to be a woman staying at home?”
“Th-that's not the case. Sorry, I'll take it back and wish it first—”
As Honoka hurriedly undid the apron, Koharu spoke smoothly,
“Ah, don't worry about that. It's put in the shelves because it's meant to be given to others or something like that. A flowery apron like that doesn't suit me, so if you like it, I'll give it to you.”
“Eh? That's.”
“Didn't you help me with dinner just now? It's a repayment of thanks.
“Bu-but that's.”
Honoka panicked as she moved her knees. The usual feisty Honoka seemed to have changed to another person.
(Didn't you give me a serious look before this, telling me that we should keep our distance?)
Koremitsu had no idea what was going on.
After hearing those words, he wondered if he did something rude to Honoka, and was troubled by that.
However, she appeared at his house entrance with a flowery apron.
She was also able to talk with Koharu so normally. Masakaze, being a person who hated women, did not speak up, but it seemed he realized the relationship between Honoka and Koremitsu as he stared at the girl, and then moved his stare to Koremitsu. He seemed to be berating Koremitsu, 'haven't you forgotten my teaching that you shouldn't get involved with women?'
, and Koremitsu felt the hand holding the chopsticks sweat.
In a corner of the room, Lapis was nibbling at the cat food. It so happened to be Masakaze's blind spot .
Flowing at the ceiling was Hikaru, watching over them with a meaningful look.
(Damn it, what are you grinning away there for?)
He did not understand what kind of expression he should show, and in the end, he ended up puffing his cheeks.
And due to Koremitsu's attitude, Honoka looked more and more intimidated.
“Well, I did help a little, but I just helped to do salad, and cutting the bitter-gourd and ginger into slices, dress it with the can of tuna and bitter orange juice. Didn't you prepare the tempura yourself, Miss Koharu—”

“Big brother Koremitsu, Shiiko can also cut bitter-gourd too. Shiiko was the one who added the small pieces of sliced dried bonito, you know?”
“Ah, I see. No wonder it's so fragrant...bonito.”
He merely responded.
Shiosiko then rubbed a finger at her nose.
“Then, let's tuck in.”
“I'm tucking in.”
“S-same here. Tucking in”
Shioriko spoke up enthusiastically, and Honoka glanced at Koremitsu in a probing look, muttering to herself.
Masakaze remained silent.
Koremitsu too clapped his hands together, muttering, “Anyway, I'm tucking in.”
The menu consisted of tempura, bitter-gourd salad, eggplant and Japanese parsley miso soup. On a side note, the Akagis do not use seafood for their tempuras, but chicken.
Koremitsu liked spicy food, so he liked lots of 7 spices blend on his tempura. He was the only one in his family who would eat it this way, and just when he was about to reach for the bottle of spices, there was another hand reaching from the opposite.
Koremitsu and Honoka's hands overlapped on the red cap of the small bottle.
They exchanged looks, blushed at the same time, and pulled their hands away.
“N-no. That was my fault.”
Honoka placed her hands on her chest tentatively, looking troubled as she fidgeted.
“I-is that so?”
Right, the 7 spice blend's not on the menu, right?
He picked up the bottle of 7 spices, and scattered the red powder on the plate of tempura.
Honoka again widened her eyes, exclaiming,
And then, she stared at Koremitsu's hand ostensibly seeing something unexpected.
“What? Is it weird? It's good, you know.”
And Honoka replied,
“I-I know that.”
She said as she took the bottle of 7 spices blend Koremitsu had put back, scattering the red powder on her chicken breast tempura.
“I normally eat like this at home too.”
Her face was blushing in embarrassment as she looked up at him.
“Eh, well, I heard that it's good for slimming, and after trying it, I liked the flavor. I always have the 7 spices at home.”
“I see. The 7 spices blend is good, right?”
“Eh, yeah.”

Both of them nodded in unison.
This is amazing! Both Miss Shikibu and Koremitsu have the same tastes!”
Hikaru squealed in excitement at the ceiling.
“I didn't think there would be anyone else who would add 7 spices powder on the tempura other than you. You found a companion here, Koremitsu.”
Koharu stated calmly,
“Adding the 7 spice blend will numb your tongue there. You won't be able to taste anything after that, right?”
Masakaze scowled as he answered.
Koremitsu and Honoka continued to stare at each other, blushing, and Shioriko exclaimed,
“I want that 7 spice powder too! Hand me that bottle, Miss Shikibu!”
And then, she snatched it from Honoka's hand, peppering the tempura with lots of the powder.
“Hey, Shiiko!”
“Stop it now, Shiiko.”
Koremitsu and Koharu tried to stop her, but Shiiko pinched her nose, her eyes filled with determination as she stared at it, and bit it like a red pumpkin.
“!!!

“Ah, wow, this salad's good. It's special, especially when mixed with the bonito bits.”
He continued,
“The bitter-gourd's cut nicely too.”
Shioriko's ears twitched in surprise, and again, before reaching her tongue out again.
“And the bitter orange juice taste refreshing too, not bad.”
This time, the exclamation came not from Shioriko, but from Honoka.
(Damn it, Shikibu's the one who added the bitter orange juice.”
“Ah, yeah.”
“Thank goodness.”
Honoka's face radiated a delighted smile.
Miss Shikibu certainly is cute here, being so delighted when the salad flavoring has been praised by you, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru gleefully snicked.
Shioriko again puffed her cheeks, while Honoka in contrast was drowning in his blissfulness, her cheeks and lips glossy.
At this moment, Masakaze spoke grimly,
“...Koremitsu's grandmother, that woman, suddenly demanded a divorce selfishly when Koremitsu's father was in college, and left the house.”
Due to these sudden words and the content itself, the dining table was rendered frozen
“Hey, gramps.”
“Look at you, suddenly saying such things out of a sudden. The guest got scared by you.”
But Masakaze ignored Koremitsu and Koharu's voices of appeal as he continued on,
“That woman, Koremitsu's mother, eloped with his homeroom teacher when he was in first grade, and never returned.”
Honoka widened her eyes, not saying anything. Of course, this was to be expected, as any person would not know how to comment about this.
Koharu raised her chopsticks and pointed them at Masakaze's throat.
“Old man, look at the situation before you talk!”
“Shut it, Koharu! Settle down!”
Koremitsu joined in, wanting to stop Koharu, but he was sent flying by her, and in the meantime, made a hole in the sliding door. Lapis looked troubled as it shook its tail, “Stop now, grandpa, Miss Koharu.” Shioriko exclaimed from the side, and the living room was rendered a mess.
“Sorry there, my old man really hates women, always saying not to get involved with them.”
After that frantic dinner, Koremitsu led a flabbergasted Honoka to his room for shelter, lowering his head to apologize.
“You were shocked there, right? He won't do anything violent to you though, and leaving that aside, Koharu, no, Koharu won't just beat anyone up for no good reason.”

Honoka finally recovered from the shock, shaking her head.
“No, I should be the one saying sorry since it looks like I was forcing myself in. It's obvious that your grandfather would be angry, or rather, I don't really pay much mind to it. Actually, I do find it heartbreaking. I won't have any other thoughts about you because of this; of course, I won't tell this to anyone else.”
“…Thanks.”
Honoka obviously appeared to be really lost as to how to respond, for her eyes were wavering about, unable to calm down, and she was unable to calm down. However, it seemed that she understood Koremitsu's intentions, her heart seemingly touched by the gesture.
By the time she realized it, the distance between them was quite close.
Both of them were standing, their bodies leaned forward.
If they were to move half a step closer, they would end up embracing each other—
Koremitsu recalled the painful yet sweet feeling of the night at the pool, when Honoka embraced Koremitsu at his chest, and his heart raced drastically.
Honoka too may have realized the distance, and went silent.
(We're not keeping our distance here…there's no distance here at all.)
His throat was exceptionally parched, and he felt weak.
Hikaru's body disappeared unknowingly from his sights, probably not intending to spoil the mood, or perhaps he hid in a corner of the room, watching with amusement.
“Speaking of which…why did you come to my house today?”
Honoka's lips quivered slightly in her hesitation.
After some time of silence, she raised her voice.
“It's nothing, just that…”
She looked aside, muttering vaguely.
The stiff response caused him to feel exceptionally hopeful, and his chest felt increasingly bitter.
“…I-I feel lost whenever I'm with you. What exactly, do you want me to do?”
He whispered, and Honoka looked shocked, tears in her eyes.
(What's with those eyes.)
For some reason, it felt like it was against the rules.
Honoka was normally feisty, but he was truly lost when she showed such a feeble look. His body temperature rose, and his sweat was dripping.
Honoka whispered vaguely.
And she gave Koremitsu an imploring look.
“I-is it alright that…I find myself liking you?”
She lowered her voice, asking sadly.
She was lost as she could not get an answer.
It was a lack of self-confidence, a reliance on others—
Koremitsu's heart was throbbing, becoming shrill.
It was beating wildly, like it was about to pop out.

(How would I know?)
Perhaps this would be a good answer.
He really turn his head around, wanting to ask his friend, very experienced in such situations, but the slender face could not be found.
(She's so feminine after all...?)
I want to protect her.
With such feelings, Koremitsu reached for that arm that would seemingly snap, and the thing shoulder.
“Big brother Koremitsu! Teach me how to do my summer homework!”
Suddenly, the door was pushed aside, and Shioriko, holding her summer vacation homework, entered the room, her eyes furious.
Koremitsu and Honoka pulled their distance.
“Wh-what kind of question?”
“Ahhh, I think I should go back now. I need to update my blog.”
While they looked away, squirming, Hikaru continued to stroke(?) Lapis on its back, muttering,
It is difficult to create a love scene with family members around, do you not think so, Lapis?”

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 4

It was the next morning.
The road surface was still chilly in the morning, and Koremitsu strolled to the Gonomiya residence, brooding over the events that transpired the previous day.
Are you thinking that you finally had a chance to deepen your relationship with Miss Shikibu?”
“Don't you lump me with you, you pervert ghost.”
Koremitsu replied the teasing Hikaru with a sour look.
(That's not the case…but why did Shikibu show such a face and ask me ask a thing? I don't understand at all…)
Is it alright that I find myself liking you?
Which boy in the world would refuse when asked with such a feeble look?
Though he would say so, he could not simply answer 'yeah, whatever' so casuall.
What exactly do you want me to do?
Koremitsu did ask Honoka before, but even he did not know.
(I just wonder how things should go between Shikibu and me…)
Should they continue to maintain their relationship as classmates? Or was he seeking a relationship beyond that phase?
(Speaking of which, do I even like Shikibu as a female?)
Though it seemed similar, the pain he felt from Yū and the bewilderment he felt from Honoka seemed different too. Koremitsu concluded that they did seem similar after all, and whenever he thought about this, his mind throbbed in agony, his heart wincing like a cloth being strained.
(Ah damn it, this is harder than my holiday homework.)
Just when he was about to scratch that perplexed head of his.
“Erm, Mr Akagi.”
A tense voice could be heard.
Koremitsu turned around to look, and found a blushing girl running to him from behind. It was a girl with fluffy, curled shoulder-length hair.
“Hanasato.”
“Go-good morning, Mr Akagi. I-it-it really was a coincidence.”
Michiru panted, shyly saying,
On this day, Michiru still had her hair down, her glasses removed, though she was dressed in the school uniform.
“I've something going on at school, so I'm rushing over now. I guess I got some benefit out of this too.”
Michiru raised her head at Koremitsu, her lips showing a delighted smile.
“A class rep's job is really tough, huh?”
“No. I do it because I like it.”

“I see. You're aiming to be the number 1 class representative in Japan, huh?”
Shall he discuss Honoka with Michiru? Certainly, the latter was the former's friend, and as Koremitsu could not understand some things since he was a boy, perhaps a girl like Michiru could understand instead.
“Anyway, Hanasato.”
“Actually, it wasn't a coincidence.”
Just when Koremitsu was about to speak up, Michiru said bashfully, her head still lowered.
“I've been waiting for you, Mr Akagi.”
(Wait, wait for me?
In front of my house?
Or this road leading to the Gonomiya house?
(It's quite a distance from my house till here. If she's waiting for me in front of my house, and stalked me till this place, does that mean she overheard my conversation with Hikaru? If she's waiting here for me instead,, that's quite some patience she has there.)
Perhaps she was looking for Koremitsu regarding something important?
Koremitsu was troubled at this point, just like the moment when he saw Honoka dressed in the flowery apron when he returned home.
(Are girls always acting so suddenly? If there's something, can't she just send me a call or a message?)
He thought about how little little time it would be required,
“I see. What do you want?”
And asked her directly,
Like Honoka the previous day, Michiru looked away and stammered, unable to answer for quite some time.
Koremitsu, I suppose your happiness will last longer if you do not ask too much right now. Also, do not give such a fiery, masculine expression when waiting for her answer.”
Hikaru grimaced as he gave some mysterious advice.
“Is it about Shikibu after all?”
Michiru was shocked as she looked up at Koremitsu.
If there was anything connecting them, it would undoubtedly be their classmate, Honoka.
There had to be a reason why she avoided him like the ordinary students, trying her best not to speak to him as she waited in hiding.
And speaking of which, Honoka's tone had sounded very strange recently, from the moment Michiru called them out to do their summer vacation homework in the library.
Perhaps Michiru was worried about Honoka, and came to discuss this with him.
When he thought about it, it really did make sense.
“I also think that Shikibu has been acting weird. She came over to my house for some reason.”

“…Hono went over to your house, Mr Akagi?”
Michiru widened her eyes as she stared at Koremitsu, looked completely startled. Hikaru was beside him, putting his hand on his forehead, going, “Ahh, he said it out anyway.”
(What? Is it a bad thing to say that Shikibu came over to my house?)
“I-is that so…so Hono, went to your house, Mr Akagi…”
Michiru's expression gradually became gloomy as she lowered her head sadly.
“Hey, what's with you.”
“…As expected, Hono.”
Michiru lowered her head more, and Hikaru too grimaced much more.
While Koremitsu was feeling extremely squeamish.
A killing intent came from in front of him.
The icy stare was ostensibly trying to stab through Koremitsu's face.
(Ack, Saiga.)
Asai too was on her way to the Gonomiya residence.
It was such a perfect coincidence that she appeared during this mess, and Koremitsu frowned.
Also, her expression was sharper than usual, and he could feel the animosity and frostiness towards him being ten times that of normal.
Asa looks really terrifying here.”
Hikaru, who always took his cousin's side, was trembling because of that terrifying appearance.
And with that expression, she exchanged looks between Koremtisu and Michiru.
Michiru, having noticed Asai, gulped and froze in place. She was akin to a tragic house rat caught by terrifying, murderous jackal in a savannah.
The frostiness emitted from behind her as she approached Koremitsu with icy footsteps. Tak…tak…
(Wh-what the? What's with this pressure? Is this some horror movie?)
Like Michiru, Koremitsu too gulped.
Asai was not glaring at Koremitsu, but at Michiru, speaking with a bone-chilling voice.
“You are a student from our school, right? What is your year and class? Your registration number? What is your relationship with this wild dog? Siblings? Relatives? Childhood friend? Girlfriend?”
It seemed Asai had yet to recognize Michiru as the braided class representative as she interrogated the latter in a rapid-fire manner.
And Michiru was so terrified she was unable to answer.
“Hey, Saiga.”
“If you are his girlfriend, please allow me to express my pity.”
“That's not it!”
“Yes, how can it be possible for a human to date a lowlife of a dog? Are you the master of this wild dog? If so, please drag it along to a place where I

cannot see. It is because you let this despicable brute loose that I was called this wild dog's fiancee—”
And in the midst of her sentence, Asai froze, biting her lips in fury and remorse. A gust of wind ruffled her radiant black hair, causing the strands to blow over her face. That scene truly was reminiscent of a horror scene.
Michiru, thoroughly pale this time, stammered as she quivered her lips,
“E-erm, I just so happened to bump into Mr Akagi just now. I-I still have some important things to deal with!”
Please excuse me!
She shouted, and ran off at her usual speed without looking back. Her curly hair and the petite back soon disappeared without a trace.
Left behind was a heinous looking Asai and a similar fiendish looking Koremitsu.
After a long bitter silence, Koremitsu hissed,
“...Hey, don't scare a kind student from our school like that. Your expression's already rather intense normally.”
Asai continued to give off that cold, freezing aura as she hissed back.
“I do not wish to hear those words from you. It is because of you that I suffered the greatest humiliation in my life.”
“What's that about?”
The moment he asked this, the air around her chilled, and her eyes were brimming with thick killing intent.
“It has nothing to do with you.”
“And you just blamed me for that.”
“Yes. All the calamities in this world are your fault. Your existence by itself is already a disaster, bringing lots of hardships and disasters, mass misfortune. And so, my expression became as heinous as yours. I am more concerned by this terrifying expression, rather than being humiliated and belittled by you. Please leave me alone.”
Just when Koremitsu was nearly unable to handle Asai's intimidation, he realized it.
While Asai gave a startling cold look, dishing out such vicious words; Hikaru's eyes were filled with bitter guilt as he watched her.
—All would be well if I could cry.
(Argh, don't give me such an expression, stop giving me that look. Don't let yourself give that look, Asa.)
Whenever Asai said such vicious words, Hikaru's eyebrows would frown further, and the light in his eyes would dim. Koremitsu's felt intolerable as he watched this, and his mind was burning as he yelled,
“That's not it!”
Asai stopped, her expression still sharp. Hikaru too widened his eyes.
“Aren't you the cute brat who wrote about looking for Tsuchinokos in your summer vacation plans or something?”

Her right eyebrow was slightly raised. The fury in her heart reached a new level as she suffered another humiliation, causing her lips to quiver slightly, her lips groaning vaguely,
“How many times...must I say the same thing? Do you really want to humiliate me?”
She glared back at Koremitsu's eyes, giving off such frostiness. And in seeming response to that cold, Koremitsu's head heated up,
“I never thought about that before. I just want to fulfill your initial promise with Hikaru. He really wants to fulfill that first promise with you, and he told me that if you grew up like that, you'll definitely become a kind, cute girl who likes to smile.”
Hikaru, standing between both Koremitsu and Asai, looked ready to burst into tears because of the former's words. His clear eyes however did not shed any tears as he merely stared at Asai, seemingy wanting to convey something to her. It was a look of worry for Asai, till his heart got entangled.
The moment she heard Hikaru's name, a wavering glint appeared in Asai's eyes, and they narrowed in sadness. She reverted back to her firm-willed look the next instance however, eked a voice out of her throat as she said,
“...If I become a cute girl, I will not be able to protect Hikaru, no?”
His heart throbbed.
At that moment, he realized this was the first time Asai expressed her true thoughts.
And at the same time, he felt that something was amiss.
“Isn't Hikaru already dead?”
What Asai said made it seem that Hikaru was still alive at this point.
With an icy stare, she stared at Koremitsu.
“That may be the case for you, but it is different for me. It is because Hikaru is no longer present now that I have to continue to protect. Or else, Hikaru —”
“Hikaru? What about him?”
Asai was being strange after all.
She definitely did attend Hikaru's funeral there. Perhaps in her heart, Hikaru did not die? What exactly about Hikaru was she trying to protect?
Hikaru's eyes continued to look at Asai, his clear eyes increasingly clouded. The light brown, thin hair swayed feebly in the wind, and his transparent body looked ready to melt into the air at this point.
(Hikaru, do you know anything about 'the thing Saiga is protecting'...?)
Quite some time passed while the trio stood still.
The frigid air was slowly replaced by the summer heat.
And Asai reverted back to her stoic expression, showing a tinge of remorse. She seemed to mutter something, and looked away from Koremitsu, walking off. She moved forward towards the Gonomiya residence without any signs of doubt.
“Wait for me.”

Koremitsu immediately gave chase to the back that was moving quickly.
“Do not follow.”
“I refuse.”
“Disappear.”
“I refuse.”
“I refuse.”
Like a panting dog, Koremitsu continued to follow Asai while the latter never turned her head back.
“You really do not understand anything. Hikaru's always at my bed side, crying and telling me that he can't go to heaven if I don't look for the Tsuchinoko with you.”
And upon reaching the doors of the Gonomiya resident, Asai turned back with a hideous look.
“There is no way Hikaru can cry! If you continue to harass me, I will kill you.”
Upon hearing this, Hikaru lowered his eyes in anguish.
At this moment, a gentle voice came from the other side of the door.
“Do not say anything dangerous like killing now, little Asai.”
After hearing that voice that was similar to Hikaru's, Asai scowled, and Koremitsu's eyes sharpened.
Using that relaxed, smiling face of his to counter the heinous glare that would cause most people to cringe, Kazuaki Mikado said,
“It is rare that I wish to see the Morning Glories bloom in this tranquil porch. If you are to give such an icy tone, the Morning Glories may mistake it for the looming winter and remain shut, unwilling to bloom.
♢ ♢ ♢
In the room where they could see the Morning Glories from the corridor, Koremitsu and Asai glared at Hikaru's older brother, Kazuaki.
(What's this guy doing here? He dares to smile and have tea with us however here after doing that sicko perverted thing?)
It was back before summer vacation ended.
Kazuaki wore a wig and paraded around the school corridors, dressed in the school student, ripping off all the flowers Hikaru took care of. The wig he wore had long black hair, and the uniform was the girls summer uniform he forcefully took off from Tsuyako.
It seemed Kazuaki's cross-dressing fetish was already thoroughly ingrained.
A long time ago, Kazuaki once snatched Tsuyako's dress and hat, put on it himself, and threw a dead rat carcass at the window of Aoi's house, even destroying all of the tulip buds Aoi and Hikaru planted.
After Hikaru died, his twisted personality escalated further, as he not only abducted Aoi, but also forced the latter to agree to marry him. He revealed his true personality as the descendant of the Spider in that room filled with Poppy aroma and white smoke.
I can be forgiven by anyone no matter what I do.”
And Kazuaki, who harped on this, was punched by Koremitsu.

His nose bleeding, Kazuaki panicked as he rolled about in a deranged manner, “M-My face!”
That was the only moment where Asai did not berate Koremitsu's actions, “I wanted to beat him up.”
Asai hissed nonchalantly back then, indicating clearly that she had the same feelings as Koremitsu.
Though she left him in the hills immediately afterward as if he deserved it.
But either way, both Koremitsu and Asai felt that Kazuaki was an incorrigible pervert who could not be understood, and that was to be expected.
(Has this guy forgotten what he did before? Anyone who revealed their cross-dressing fetish will be embarrassed by it, right? Ho can anyone just sample the tea so frivolously? Is he just a shameless person after all?)
Kazuaki narrowed his eyes beneath the glasses quietly, showing a serene smile at his lips.
There was none of the madness he showed at the villa.
And Hikaru too looked conflicted as he stared at his older brother.
Kazuaki's obsession with Hikaru was such that he stole Aoi's painting for Hikaru,
Because Aoi here is Hikaru's most beloved.”
And continued to harass her,
And I wish to have Hikaru's 'most beloved'.”
One had to wonder whether it was out of his favoritism for his half-brother, or whether it was malice.
Hikaru personally spoke little of the legitimate wife's son Kazuaki, and the latter was like a person from another world to him. From this sense, Kazuaki was pitiful in a certain sense. However, there was no sympathy for him.
Orime too could tell from Koremitsu and Asai's serious looks that they were not on good terms with Kazuaki, and perhaps she was able to remained so posited due to her many years of experience.
The granddaughter-in-law, always coming over to say 'it's time for medicine, grandmother', brazenly hoping that they would leave, was very welcoming of Kazuaki as she personally present him tea and sweets.
“This is what we bought for you, Mr Kazuaki. Please take your time with it.” She showed him courtesy.
And so, Kazuaki put on the facade of a well-bred young lord, speaking courteously.
“Is that so? Why, thank you. I do really like the water yōkan of this shop. You really are very kind and efficient, Miss Kitoko.”
“Well, that is.” and with such pleasantries, the granddaughter-in-law looked delighted.
(This two-faced bastard.)

If a stare could burn through a human, Kazuaki's face would surely be wrecked completely by both Koremitsu and Asai's bombardment. No matter how they glared at him though, he continued on nonchalantly.
And also, Kazuaki threw a bomb at them with a smiling face.
“Asa, Mr Akagi, both of you have been looking terrifyingly silent for quite a while. Even if you had been jealous and squabbling since morning, it is rude to give such attitudes in an elder's house. It cannot be helped however, since both of you are in high school, still children after all.”
Both Koremitsu and Asai's shoulders shivered.
(What jealous and arguing?)
“I never expected the rumors of little Asai and Mr Akagi going out together to be true. I would not believe it either if I had not witnessed it personally.”
(Who do you say are going out together!!!?)
Koremitsu's neck had goosebumps all over it as he screamed out in his heart, probably shouting the exact same things as Asai herself. She showed her cold eyes, her back straightened, and the hands resting on her knees were shivering.
Koremitsu was about to lash out 'you gotta be kidding me', but it was not wise to let out an outburst in front of Orime, so he kept it within himself.
“That thing about her is just completely bogus.”
He whispered,
And Asai too concluded with a frigid voice,
“Eh, it is completely baseless.”
But Kazuaki continued to laugh, ostensibly not hearing them as he said,
“Ahaha, there is no need to be embarrassed about it. There is no way a couple not dating would say such words that would make people smile. I simply am embarrassed just listening in on both of you.”
(What do you mean words that would make people smile? I threatened to kill you here!)
“If Mr Akagi cheats on you, you may think of killing him, and die together with him, will you? You really like him this much, I suppose, Asai.”
The overly embarrassing topic left Asai and Koremitsu unable to say anything.
And Hikaru, floating in the air,
With a pretentious gentle look of a big brother on his face, Kazuaki smiled.

“That is good for you, Asai. You always had been independent, intelligent, feared and isolated from the surrounding boys, so as a cousin, I do worry that you are unable to marry. However, Mr Akagi does not have that sort of common sense, and he certainly is a match made in heaven for you. You should focus on being a bride, little Asai, and simply leave little Aoi to me as a member of the Mikados.”
Asai's face was dyed beetroot, and the hands placed on her knees shivered again, even her lips were quivering.

Koremitsu too clenched his fists tightly, and just when he wanted to stand up, Hikaru could be heard from behind, trying to restrain him,
Endure it, Koremitsu.”
(Uugh, but that pervert brother really speaks whatever's on his mind.”
You cross-dressing pervert!
He wanted to shout this and send him flying opposite the corridor with a kind.
Even Asa as a girl managed to endure it. You have to do so too.”
(Uuu, damn it.)
Asai seemed to have frozen her emotions as she spoke coldly,
“...That really is far from reality, far from the truth, such that it cannot even be considered a joke. And right now, Aoi has yet to give up her love for Hikaru, and never had the chance to meet you, Mr Kazuaki.”
“Hm, is that so? But I do still have the wish that little Aoi is married to me. Ah, Lady Orime, do you mind giving me a few words? When that happens, Aoi or the Saotome head will recognize my authority, no? Because, the only ones allowed to marry the Mikados' head is either the Saotomes or the Udates' daughter.”
(What the?)
Koremitsu knew very well Orime's word was something Asai yearned so much.
That was why Asai came to visit the Gonomiya residence every single day.
Orime's word was also something Hikaru mentioned as special.
The current head of the Mikados, and even the former, were given a word from Orime.
If Orime handed her word over to Asai, perhaps the Mikados' power would favor the Wisteria faction—?
Hikaru widened his eyes greatly, and Asai leaned forward, giving a nefarious look.
“I was the one who asked for Lady Orime's word first—”
Kazuaki cut off Asai's words gently yet decisively.
“Little Asai, even if you do get Lady Orime's word, what can you do with it? The only ones able to receive the blessings of the Asagao Princess and her word are the males of the Mikados. Will that not mean me? Or is there another one worthy of being the head of the Mikados?”
After hearing this, Hikaru looked shocked as he watched from the sight, ostensibly faltering. Koremitsu glanced aside slightly, and found his friend looking very pale, apprehensive and distressed.
Like Hikaru, Asai too seemed conflicted by something, her anxiety clear for all to see.
“Well, what is it about, actually? Little Asai?”
Kazuaki's tone got stickier at the moment, his expression seemingly pressuring Asai too, giving a lascivious glint.

Koremitsu had never heard about another of Hikaru's brother other than Kazuaki, and at this point, with Hikaru dead, Kazuaki should be the only son of the head able to inherit the title.
someone else
after all?)
Asai looked as if she was enduring Kazuaki's interrogation, ostensibly frantically thinking in her mind with all her might too. Also, there was Hikaru's fearful expression, wondering if Asai would mention
And while watching both their expressions, the doubt in Koremitsu's mind gradually became belief.
Was that Asai Saiga fighting a losing battle right from the start?
If however, there was a heir that could oppose Kazuaki, and that heir was hidden secretly by Asai—
Then why would Asai and Hikaru have such tense, grim looks? Should this topic not be led towards the hidden 'heir'?
Asai's closed lips opened slightly,
“Regarding the potential heir to the Mikados, it is not just you, Mr Kazuaki...”
Hikaru's face was contorted.
There appeared a stern glint in Asai's eyes, willing to oppose Kazuaki. Just when Hikaru was about to turn aside.
Orime, who had been silent all this while, spoke gently,
“You are being too formal here, Mr Kazuaki. My word is not such an amazing thing.”
Her words immediately eased this volatile atmosphere, and the crowd gathered their sights upon her.
With a comfortable look, she continued her words,
“There is nothing significant in the words I write, but if you state your desire to have this old lady’s words, I will be willing to write a few words and hand them to you.”
♢ ♢ ♢
(Lady Orime just protected me just now.)
Asai left the Gonomiya residence as she walked down the scorching road that ostensibly melted her shoes, biting her lips lightly due to the shame of her own immaturity.
If Orime did not interrupt her words, she probably would have revealed all the important information to Kazuaki back then. Her intent to plead Orime for help had long been conveyed, which was why Orime proposed for Asai and Kazuaki to challenge each other, and for the winner to have a word. This helped to prevent Orime's short-sightedness and Kazuaki's probing.
Kazuaki too probably realized the trump card that was in Asai's hands.
But even so, she should not have spilled out what was going on in rage at that moment.
(I wanted to calm down, but I got riled up in Mr Kazuaki, and became so emotional and impulsive.)

It was because Kazuaki continued to press the matter about her and Koremitsu, and brazenly proclaiming that he wanted to marry little Aoi.
(No, that cannot be the excuse for my failure.)
It was because she lacked patience and poise that she fell for Kazuaki's words. She would have to go through much emotional control against that Kazuaki, the smooth-talker who had been making one lie after another.”
She too felt regretful, and was reflecting on her actions, but Orime's proposal really gave her a great chance.
On Sunday, 4 days later, please write your favorite words in front of me. If I do like any of your words, I shall receive it as a gift, and return my own word.
For fair judging of this competition, I shall invite judges other than myself.
Neither Asai nor Kazuaki raised any dissent.
And Kazuaki calmly smiled.
This certainly is very elegant, is it not. It reminds me of the poetry contests held during the Heian Era, where people would compete in poetry recitals to determine the quality. In this case, our contest can be said to be 'calligraphy'. Please allow me to take part. What do you think, little Asai?
He turned over to Asai, looking very confident
Yes, I too accept this challenge.
Asai too straightened her back and answered.
If she was to win this calligraphy contest, she would be able to obtain Orime's words. Also, it would convey to the judges and all those related to the Mikados who Orime would support, Kazuaki or Asai.
With that, the power struggle would change.
But if it went south, and if Orime gave Kazuaki her word—
Kazuaki would basically end up being the next head of the Mikados. If that were to happen, it would be nearly impossible to overturn the situation.
(I have to win no matter what.)
Asai continued to walk in the scorching day as the sun rays baked her head, her long legs trying their best to support her body that would ostensibly collapse if she got careless, looking aside clumsily.
The red hound she hated most had his back slouched, his face scowling as he walked, possibly pacing her as he walked on in the same stride at the exact moment, kicking his gangly legs out. Though he was following beside her, he continued to keep his lips shut, silently walking with that arrogant, insolent sidelong expression of his.
Neither Asai nor Koremitsu said a single word ever since they left the Gonomiya residence. Koremitsu would never look at her once, let alone talk to her, but he still followed her.
Should she ask Koremitsu to write the words in her place? Asai felt perplexed as this skepticism lingered in her heart.
Orime really liked Koremitsu's words. If Koremitsu was to write instead, the chances of beating Kazuaki for Orime's words would greatly increase.

Asai wondered if Koremitsu himself was an advantage granted to her from Orime, given that Asai was fighting alone against the Rose faction.
(But do I have to ask this dog?)
Her body shivered whenever she thought about it, her cheeks froze, and her heart queasy.
This to her was nothing more than humiliation, and she did not wish to borrow the strength of this man who lied about being Hikaru's friend.
She would rather bite her own tongue than ask for such a request.
(But...that is something required to protect Hikaru.)
During the past few months, Asai met Hikaru quite a few times in her light sleep. When he was young, when he was in middle school, when he was in high school—
Each of the Hikaru would give her an anguished look, whispering hoarsely I cannot say.
To prevent Hikaru from showing such an expression, to prevent anyone from telling him
if only you were not born on this world
She would give up even her own heart. She could seal her own emotions completely, never to emote again.
Right, this was not a
(I can lower my head to a dog as long as it is for Hikaru's sake.)
Koremitsu surely would not refuse.
He had been silent all this time, but it seemed he was waiting for Asai to speak up, his lips pouting as he followed her by the side.
She would not beg for help.
She would simply make use of this confounded dog, and dispose it when done.
She held her breath, imagining herself to be a corpse. A corpse would never feel shame or hatred, but this was not be able to extinguish the fury in her heart completely, instead causing it to rage uncontrollably. She inadvertently clenched her fist.
And with such a worst mood, Asai tried her best to eke out her voice,
“For the calligraphy contest, can you...”
Koremitsu's ears twitched in surprise,
“Take...my place...”
She felt repulsed
Though she had been taking the bare minimum of supplements these few days, her throat felt numb, and she felt nauseous. She had to endure this for Hikaru's sake, and she trained herself many times for that purpose.
And beside her, Koremitsu seemed interested as he focused his attention on his ears.
Suddenly, he stopped.
(What is the matter?)
Asai too stopped.
Koremitsu stared forward into the distance.

Aoi was standing there.
She was dressed in a simple white cotton one-piece dress and sandals. It was the dress she liked to wear at home. However, the ribbon usually tied on her hair neatly was a little messy this time around. She looked awful, tears welled in her eyes, her eyebrows drooped weakly, her lips tightly shut in the opposite direction. She looked extremely frail at this point, and also perilous.
Asai immediately walked forward worriedly.
And she immediately heard Aoi's trembling voice,
“What Mr Kazuaki said is true after all…Asa and Mr Akagi are being on good terms.”
Asai was stunned.
“You met Kazuaki? When?”
Asai did send someone to watch over Aoi while the latter did her part-time work, but she did not receive any report of Kazuaki meeting her! She should have known of Aoi's actions and whoever she contacted.
“What did Kazuaki say to you?”
Flustered, she grabbed her elegant shoulders firmly, her tone seeming berating Aoi sternly.
“Hey, Saiga.” Koremitsu rushed in from behind, trying his best to stop Asai.
But before Koremitsu could pull Asai's arm around from Aoi, Aoi shook it off.
There was a small, sharp pain below Asai's right elbow that came with a snap, and Asai looked back at Aoi incredulously.
Did Aoi just shake my arm off…?
Aoi's eyebrows were raised, her eyes wavering as she clenched her fists tightly, shouting with a precarious voice,
“Please do not act as if you are worried about me!”
This was the first time Aoi had expressed her fury at Asai like this.
Whenever Asai badmouthed Koremitsu, Aoi would at most say things like 'that is too much! I am not talking to you again, Asa!” that was simply the indignation of a child against an adult, a cute show of stubbornness.
At this point however, Aoi was glaring at Asai with a perilously heinous expression one could normally not imagine her giving. Her outburst too cause Asai to be furthermore startled.
“You sent someone to watch over me, pretending to protect me. You were just looking down on meall this time, right?”
The surveillance got revealed?
That was not all.
(Look down—wait!)
Asai recalled the conversation she had with Tsuyako in the student council office during midsummer vacation, and the blood flowing in her froze that instead.
Tsuyako was berating Asai for sending someone to watch over Aoi.

In contrast to the Saotomes, the eldest daughter of the Udates was by nature a carefree individual, and not only did she cancel her engagement with Kazuaki, there was also the scandal with Hikaru, and even she told Asai off,
It seems that you know something.
Asai shot Tsuyako some cold words, and the latter stared back with her bewitching pupils, answering
I know about it.
Answering,
You and I are the same type of person.
Tsuyako's tone and expression was full of pity, and then, she became stern again as she clearly expressed to Asai.
Miss Asai, you are always pretending to protect Miss Aoi. In fact, you are looking down on Miss Aoi, am I correct?
“…You overheard my conversation with Miss Tsuyako? Aoi?”
To Asai, it was a shock akin to the whole world freezing.
Aoi bit her lips, lowering her stare.
That was her
Suddenly, darkness loomed upon Asai's eyes, and the light vanished.
Aoi's yell struck Asai's ears sharply,
“Please leave me alone! If you hate me, please do not get involved with me!”
Her eyes were teary as she ran out.
“Wait, Aoi!”
Koremitsu frantically tried to call for Aoi, but the latter ran off without looking back.
“What happened there, Saiga? What did you discuss with sempai!? Hey, Saiga, Saiga!!”
Koremitsu continued to holler beside Asai, who had lost all expression, standing there blankly. She had already lost all strength to chase after Aoi, to chase the noisy dog away.
At this point, she was ostensibly as cold as a corpse.
(Aoi…knew.)
About Asai's
true thoughts
That ever since they were children, Asai had been condescending with regards to Aoi when they were together—

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 5

“So…Miss Aoi overheard our conversation outside the door.”
It was sunset.
While the school building was dyed red, Koremitsu and Tsuyako were having a discussion in the Japanese dance clubroom. This senpai of his whose long, radiant red hair akin to the red weeping cherry blossoms was tied loosely to the side in a knot, and was dressed in a water blue long-sleeved kimono. She frowned her pretty eyebrows, and let out a sigh.
On their way back from the Gonomiya residence, Aoi suddenly appeared in front of them, yelled, and vanished. After that, Asai simply froze there like an ice sculpture, unable to move.
No matter how Koremitsu tried to call her, she never responded. The moment he was at his wits end, she hurriedly took out her cellphone, and called for a vehicle to fetch in in a flat tone.
Once it came quickly, she got into the vehicle, and disappeared.
She did not respond to any of Koremitsu's words at all while waiting for her ride, not even looking in his direction once.
Koremitsu knew that she was not intentionally ignoring him, but that she could not longer see him in her sights, so he did not leave her until the vehicle came.
He was really worried about what happened to Aoi,
But Hikaru was worried about both Aoi and Asai, sounding uneasy as he said nervously,
If will be good if Miss Aoi made it home safely. Ahh, Koremitsu, please give Miss Aoi a call for confirmation.”
After watching Asai leave, Koremitsu dialled Aoi's cellphone, but she simply left it as a voicemail receiver, and never picked up a phone.
“Where are you right now? Call me back.”
He left a recording, and added on with a machine,
I'm worried. Call me soon.”
But even so, Aoi never responded to the message nor called back, and Koremitsu had no choice but to go to her house and the cafe where she worked part-time.
“I managed to contact Aoi! It seems she was alone in a manga cafe single room spacing out. Right now, she says she's cleaning the cat toilet.”
Sueko, who was hired by Tojo, informed Koremitsu this, allowing the him to be relieved.
However, the problem was not truly solved in any way. To understand the reason for Asai and Aoi's discord, Koremitsu visited Tsuyako, who seemed to know something.
Tsuyako told him about what she talked to Asai about.

And after hearing it, Koremitsu too was greatly shocked, his heart crushed by sharp claws.
(Looking down on her—are you serious?)
Aoi definitely would be hurt if she heard that.
And this definitely was the reason why Aoi seemed so lethargic recently, why she had been evading Asai and Koremitsu.
Hikaru too remained silent with a gloomy face.
Koremitsu could sense gloom from Hikaru's eyes, but they did not seem overly surprised; this gave him hint that Hikaru probably suspected Asai's feelings regarding Aoi.
When Aoi's painting got stolen back then, Asai barged into the Japanese dance room to growl at Tsuyako, and the latter did mention a lot of things about Aoi back at Asai.
Since you are very intelligent, you should be able to comprehend the feelings you have about her?
To keep protecting her, to guard her from being hurt, to prevent her from being sullied, you-
At that moment,
No Tsuyako. You must not say such things!"
Hikaru yelled.
Once Asai left, Tsuyako seemed to be reflecting upon her own actions.
I think I said…too much unnecessary things to Miss Asai.
Tsuyako muttered ardently,and forlornly.
At this point too, Tsuyako was giving the same pained look as she did back then, the remaining red sunlight raining upon her alluring sidelong face, creating a dark shadow.
“I was the one who caused Miss Aoi to know of Miss Asai's true feelings, and I do apologize about that…it is just that it is not a good thing to continue on with such an unnatural situation…”
Hikaru lowered his eyes and head as he stood at the red and bright window side. Most likely, he too had the same view as Tsuyako.
“Surely, if this is to continue for a long time, Miss Asai will be the one suffering.”
Not Aoi who was being looked down upon? But Asai, who had been looking down?
The clouds in Tsuyako's eyes got thicker, and her expression became stern and stiff.
“Who do you think is suffering more? The one who knows that she has negative feelings about the one she is protecting? Or the one who continued to be protected without knowing anything?”
“That's…”
Naturally, it would be the person who realized her own dastardly unsightliness.
“For Hikaru, it was necessary for him to be betrothed to the eldest daughter of the Saotome’s, which would be Miss Aoi. If not for Miss Aoi's unique

status, Hikaru would never be recognized as a child of the Mikados. Miss Asai probably understood that already since young. Even though she understood this logically however, it was to be expected that she had some annoyance against Miss Aoi emotionally, as the latter was betrothed to Hikaru as a matter of fact...to curb such negative feelings, Miss Asai probably had no choice but to look down upon Miss Aoi. Because of that, it was a convenience that Miss Aoi became a princess who is unable to do anything by herself and not know anything about the ways of the world.. That is why Miss Asai was able to establish herself as Miss Aoi's guardian, always protecting her, staying by her side, taking care of her."
After hearing Tsuyako's words, Koremitsu felt the bitter saliva in his mouth. His body became rigid.
Hikaru seemed to be reproaching himself as he remained at the window side, his body dyed red as he remained motionless and stuck there. This caused Koremitsu's gut to wince—
"!!, but that's not all, right...?"
He raised his voice, overpowering Tsuyako's voice.
"Saiga is really black hearted, hideous, cold-blooded, a woman who annoys me to no end—but she really showed some serious intent when she told me not to approach Aoi, and when I saved Aoi from Kazuaki, she was really worried about Aoi. She would visit Aoi's part-time working place every single day even when she got so busy she collapsed due to lack of sleep—"
Why in the world am I defending her!?
Asai probably did not wish for Koremitsu to defend her either. However, he did notice thoroughly how Asai treated Aoi as an important person, how she continued to protect Aoi, putting in lots of focus.
Both Tsuyako and Hikaru stared at Koremitsu with tragic, clear eyes. With those 4 eyes staring at him, he felt sadness in his heart. Tsuyako spoke with some bitterness,
"Yes...that is definitely not all. Miss Asai's feelings regarding Miss Aoi...however, Miss Asai right now will never admit to those feelings."
The gaze in Hikaru's eyes gradually diluted.
And while Koremitsu groaned, Tsuyako whispered to him with a gentle expression.
"A straightforward child like you, Mr. Akagi, will find this difficult to understand, I suppose? However, I cannot deny Miss Asai's rebellious personality after all. She and I are the same."
"You did say it before, senpai, about you and Saiga
being similar yet different
in some ways."
After seeing Koremitsu curl his lips into a frown, Tsuyako showed a mature adult smile.
"Miss Asai and I do wish to become special people to Hikaru."
"Special...to Hikaru...?"
Hikaru, engulfed in the sunset, twitched his eyelashes ardently.

With an adult's look, Tsuyako nodded.
“Yes...Hikaru truly loved every single flower equally, truly and deeply. To Hikaru, every flower is so special, so important. Even so, both of us wish to be the most outstanding to Hikaru himself, the best flower. I chose to accept the path Hikaru took, including to accept all the flowers Hikaru truly loved...and I offered my body, heart and fate to him. I nestled to him, wanting to become one with him. I continue to remain proud as the most beautiful flower in Hikaru's garden.”
There is no one who separates herself from jealously like Tsuyako.
That was what Hikaru said.
No matter who Hikaru dated, Tsuyako would never compare herself to them. Even if it was Aoi, she never thought of wanting to exchange fates.
Tsuyako chose to be the most beautiful flower in the garden that was highly exalted.
“Miss Asai chose a path of not becoming one of Hikaru's flowers. She would definitely not fall in love with Hikaru, never embracing Hikaru, never thinking of becoming one with Hikaru, and furthermore, to become the existence furthest from Hikaru. Perhaps Miss Asai was hoping to become such a person, to create an equal relationship with him—”
If she were to fall in love with Hikaru, Asai too would probably become one of his many flowers.
She would become one of the flowers waiting for Hikaru to pour in his love.
That was why she would not fall in love with Hikaru.
And she stood at a place closest to Hikaru, continuing to be Hikaru's confidant and guardian
That was the path Asai chose.
“Because of my secret affair with Hikaru, I ended up returning to Japan, and whenever I met Miss Asai after that, I would think,
this person truly loves Hikaru so much, protecting him with such a firm heart. She really is pure, like a unicorn that only allows the purest of heart ...this probably is the reason why Miss Asai hates me, but also why I do like her.”
Koremitsu always thought of Asai, who always gave a cold stare, as a person he could not stomach.
And till this point, this fact still remained.
But Tsuyako's point about Asai loving Hikaru was ingrained deeply in Koremitsu's heart, and even the he imagined the sight of Asai's cool face changing into something else.
(Hikaru, you definitely knew about that too.)
Hikaru's eyes were looking into the distance as he remained at the dimming window side. It was a fleeting, gloomy look.
Perhaps he was thinking about the past.
About Asai's promise—
“I do wish for Miss Asai to be happy. Well, Hikaru is no longer around after all...”

After muttering this, Tsuyako then teased as she smiled,
“I suppose Miss Asai will hate me more if she knew that I said such things. Please keep it a secret from her.”
◇ ◇ ◇
On the next day, Koremitsu went to look for Aoi at her workplace, the cafe.
“Welcome. Ah—”
Once she noticed Koremitsu's face, she froze up.
She then quickly looked away, lowering her head, wanting to leave Koremitsu.
Hearing hearing his serious call, she stopped in her tracks, her back facing him.
“S-sorry for letting you worry about me the previous day.”
And then, she murmured,
“But, as I wrote in the message regarding my issue with Asa, I want to settle this on my own…Mr. Akagi, you do not have to do so much at this point.“
She swept her hair behind, revealing her slender neck, also showing her trembling little shoulders. The shoulders looked frailer than Asai's, helpless.
(Senpai said that Saiga is suffering…but even Aoi herself is suffering here…this is the first time Aoi heard that the childhood friend she always relied on was looking down on her…)
If Aoi did not know about this, perhaps she could continue to live blissfully.
However, she knew.
Miss Aoi…”
Hikaru reached his hand out for Aoi, but once he did so halfway, he showed a bitter expression, and pulled his hand back, lowering his head.
Koremitsu's heart winced.
“Did Saiga contact you?”
There was no answer.
In that case, it seemed Asai did not bother trying to defend herself.
Koremitsu gnashed his teeth with all his might.
“I think that Saiga just wants to protect you as a guardian, that looking down on you is, well…it's like those parents saying 'our kid here can't do anything if we aren't around to keep watch'."
The back profile of Aoi looked so feeble, Koremitsu inadvertently wanted to say something. Even if that was just a one-sided wish on his part
Aoi whispered softly,
“Am I…a useless person who cannot do anything without Asa protecting me?”
Hikaru lifted his head in shock, and Koremitsu too was flustered.
“No, that's not it. Saiga's just someone a little more complicated, always unwittingly saying such harsh words. Those aren't her true thoughts, she really treasures—”
“…You really understand Asa very well, Mr. Akagi, even though you always bicker with her when you meet.”

“—That's what Hikaru told me.”
“Yeah, Hikaru told me that Asa's true personality's that of a good kid.”
Aoi continued to lower her head, cringing.
Both Hikaru and Koremitsu watched her petite back with bated breaths.
And Aoi hushed her voice as she let out a whisper from her lips.
“Hikaru and Asa…would sometimes talk about things I do not understand, and they then go out together…whenever this happen, I feel that I am the one excluded.”
M-Miss Aoi, that is.”
Both Koremitsu and Hikaru's faces were contorted at the same time.
(H-hey, Hikaru, is that really the case?)
He glanced at the latter, looking extremely anxious.
Eh, I did not intend to leave Miss Aoi aside, but those are the things I can talk to Asa about, but not Miss Aoi.”
(Seeing how you're so restrained, I guess it has to be about some other woman.)
But you see, Miss Aoi cannot handle things like snakes and bugs, even saying that she hates kappas because they are sticking. Of course, it is not that I have intention of belittling Miss Aoi, but her skin is a little more sensitive, and catches cold more easily than Asa and me—”
Whenever the topic involved Aoi, Hikaru's mind would end up in a complete mess, panicking, saying some random ramblings that he did not comprehend. Though he was hailed as a harem prince, he really was of no use whenever it counted.
But as his friend, Koremitsu had no choice but to follow up.
“G-guys do have their issues to worry about…you see, Saiga doesn't have any charm there, no different from a guy.”
“I suppose Hikaru finds Asa more reliable than me.”
“!! Why are you comparing yourself with her? Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that Saiga isn't forcing herself to be with you.”
Aoi turned her body towards Koremitsu, but this did not imply that she had opened her heart. Instead, she looked really furious, raising her eyes sharply as she lambasted him,
“Are you standing on Asa's side too, Mr. Akagi? Do you also think that I am a weak, pitiful person who is unable to do anything? Is that why you are being so earnest to me?”
Koremitsu was overwhelmed by Aoi's presence, unable to say anything.
He wanted to murmur and say something, but Aoi suddenly lowered her soaked eyes, giving a feeble look as she looked ready to burst into tears.
That feeble expression caused Koremitsu's heart to jump, his heart faltered.
“So-sorry.”
Aoi spoke with a hoarse voice.
The slender fingers were pinched into fists in front of her chest, her shoulders still quivering as she did her best to hold in her tears. All these caused Koremitsu's heart to scream.

Koremitsu was always unable to withstand a girl's tears; if a petite, feeble girl like Aoi was to show such an expression, his heart would pound uneasily, erratically.
“I-I am sorry. Do you mind going back, just for today? Mr. Akagi, you are the only one I do not want to think of me as a useless person...”
Aoi's voice sounded so fleeting, seemingly about to disappear at this point. Her frail shoulders continued to shiver...
(I'm the only one...what does she mean?)
The next instant he realized those words, Koremitsu's face went hot, and he was confused.
(Why am I blushing here?)
This was not the time for him to get his heart racing, and furthermore, she was his friend's fiancee. Hikaru would certainly have a weird misunderstanding again, and start pouting again.
The girl reading the book at the wall stopped her hands, giving a refreshing look at them.
And Sueko, standing at the counter, '
that's enough already',
was giving him the middle finger, conveying that meaning.
...Let us depart, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru whispered at Koremitsu's ear.
It was true that Aoi would not open her heart to him even if he stayed her.
“Hey, I'll contact you again later, so pick up my call, or else I'll come look for you directly. I never thought of you as a worthless person.”
He quickly said a few words to Aoi, and left the shop.
But even so, both Koremitsu and Hikaru were still concerned about Aoi, roaming outside the cafe, and even bringing their faces to the window, peering inside.
Aoi still looked as if she was about to bawl as she lowered her head. She blinked her eyes, seemingly wanting to remove the remaining tears, took a deep breath, and blinked her eyes again, before reaching her elegant fingers below her eyes, wiping her face.
(Damn it, I can't watch this any longer.)
Hikaru too kept his lips shut in anguish. At that moment, the shop doors opened again.
Even with tears in her eyes, Aoi turned around,
And welcomed brightly.
In fact, her voice was still trembling slightly, and the smile on her lips were flimsy. Her eyes were red because of her tears.
However, the way she did her best to smile and speak positively permeated through Koremitsu's heart.

And Hikaru, right beside Koremitsu, leaning his face at the window, looked rather startled too as he opened his eyes wide.

(She's in no mood to continue with her work, but she's still doing her best in there…she held back her tears, and tried to smile and welcome the customers…)
Perhaps it was because he was touched by Aoi's determination to remain resilient that his eyes were inadvertently watery, at the same time sad and miserable thinking for her sake.
And there was a tinge of bitterness spreading in Hikaru's eyes.
“Let's go.”
Koremitsu left the window.
You are right.”
Hikaru removed his lonely stare away from Aoi, but before he left, he could not help but look back again, feeling solitary again. Certainly, his feelings must be as conflicted Koremitsu's.
And it was because Koremitsu knew this that he did not want to mention it.
“…Where do we go next?”
Let us go to where Asa is.”
“To that granny Gonomiya?”
No, at this time, she should be at school.”
“Ack…I have to go to school even during summer vacation?”
◇ ◇ ◇
The shocking matter was that Asai really was at the school's student council, facing the computer alone as she worked.
When they went their separate ways the previous day, Asai lost all emotion, like an ice doll, and it was worrying.
He was relieved that at this point, Asai was showing her usual unhappy look.
After hearing the brusque greeting from the door, Asai lifted her head and gave a sharp glare at Koremitsu.
“I am busy. Go back now.”
“So cruel without warning? Well, I guess it's good as long as you're not crying and wailing there.”
“It is less likely for me to cry than the world to be destroyed.”
She spat back coldly.
Koremitsu saw Hikaru looking glum because of these words beside him, and he too felt anguished.
(Oh yeah…this girl did make a promise with Hikaru not to cry.)
Since Hikaru cannot cry, I shall not cry either.
(But she's still able to remain so calm even after what happened with Aoi?)
The image of Aoi's feeble profile as she tried her best to make that face appeared in Koremitsu's mind, causing something itchy to be stuck in his throat.
“I just went to meet Aoi.”
Perhaps Asai already received a report from her informant.
“Do not do any unnecessary things.”
Asai averted her eyes and spoke in a voice chillier than before.

“At least send a message to her or something.”
“If I send one now, Aoi will delete it without reading anything. That girl always has been stubborn and pure.”
“But even so, you can tell Aoi what you think about her anyway.”
“Eh, just use this opportunity to tell her that 'looking down' isn't what it actually means, but that you used the wrong term because Japanese's too tough or something.”
“That was not a mistake.”
Koremitsu was left speechless.
Hikaru too called out for Asai, seemingly wanting to stop her.
And Asai remained seated on the chair as she stared at Koremitsu.
The eyes were not wet in any way, and there did not seem to be any faltering or weakness, just a sharp glint of a sword.
“In fact, I was looking down on her, condescending about her.”
Do not say any more Asa.”
Hikaru pleaded Asa with a bitter look, but being a ghost, his voice could not reach her.
“Well, I suppose it is to be expected. Aoi herself is a fragile princess who does not anything about this world after all. It does suit her to be taken care of and despised for the rest of her life.“
Koremitsu felt completely infuriated, and yelled.
“You idiot! Even if it's a lie, you shouldn't say that!”
Hikaru knew that his voice could not reach out, yet he kept calling for Asai, for he knew that Asai was hurting herself as she said those words.
(Even you would be hurt after being rejected by Aoi like that! I can see you clearly when you stumbled into the car all dejected like that!)
But Asai did not stop her spite for Aoi.
“I am not lying. It is because Aoi is so fragile, so ignorant regarding the ways of the world, so incompetent, that I was able to remain with her, that I was able to pretend to like her.”
“Was it all an act?”
Koremitsu's voice became vague, his blood sizzling as his blood ostensibly boiled.
Asai answered Koremitsu with an icy voice,
“That is correct.”
Hikaru seemed to be enduring his pain as he frowned hard, muttering,
That is not the case..that is not true, is it, Asa?”
Koremitsu inadvertently gritted his teeth, recalling what Tsuyako said, his head hurting like it was being strained to its limits.
Yes...that is definitely not all. Miss Asai's feelings regarding Miss Aoi...however, Miss Asai right now will never admit to those feelings.
(That's not the case, is it, Asai?)
“But Aoi has already changed, and it is your fault that I cannot pretend to care for her.”
Asai's frigid eyes suddenly revealed a fiery fury of hatred.

“If you had not showed up, Aoi would not have done such a foolish thing, like to be independent, and she would not have noticed my thoughts, and then she would have lived a happy life under my care. You are the culprit who ruined all of this. It is because you spread your lies everywhere that everything is ruined.”
She was giving Koremitsu a glare filled with hatred, just as she did at Hikaru's apartment. She then asked with a sharp, egregiously menacing glare.
And what do you know about Hikaru?”
It was an intense glare that revealed her all—her emotions.
“The only one who really knows Hikaru's heart is me. His sadness, his pain, his despair—I shall bear them all! I shall protect Hikaru! You are not needed!!”
Asai's face was contorted as she let out a shrill, maniacal scream.
While she continued to become one with Hikaru and deny Koremitsu, the latter did not show fury at her, merely feeling a pain of a pound of flesh wrought off his heart.
Miss Asai wishes to be a special person to Hikaru, and for that wish, she chose a path of not becoming one of Hikaru's flowers,
Tsuyako had said.
“Saiga, don't you want to be Hikaru's 'most beloved'? Hikaru's 'lover'?”
The words Koremitsu said were not stopped by Hikaru, who was beside Asai.
Instead, Hikaru stared at Asai with tension and anticipation, hoping that Koremitsu could destroy Asai's twisted, passionate tower.
Suddenly, there was a loud sound at Koremitsu's face.
Hikaru widened his eyes in shock, and Asai's palm was red, her breathing erratic due to her fury as she yelled,
“My feelings for Hikaru are not that kind crude and commonplace thing!”
And that definitely was the taboo zone for her.
Koremitsu's face, slapped by Asai, was searing with heat.
“Disappear from my sights right now! I am not like Aoi here! I do not need your help, or anyone else's! I do not need your suggestions or your assistance!”
Koremitsu did not wish for the conversation to end at this point, but as he bit his lips, Asai shot him a volatile, cold stare as she hissed,
“As for Lady Orime's word, I will write it myself.”
Asai refused any form of help from Koremitsu at this instant.
“I want to protect Hikaru using my own strength.”
◇ ◇ ◇
Sorry for making you do all these annoying things, Koremitsu.”
Having left the student council office, Hikaru whispered with a gloomy face on the warm corridor devoid of any person.
The corridor during this summer vacation was completely silent, and it felt wider than usual.

Koremitsu slouched his back as he proceeded forth, muttering,
“Don't worry about that. I'm already hated by that Saiga anyway. Tell me something though, Hikaru. What
is Saiga trying to protect? You're already dead.”
Hikaru bit his lips tightly, hesitating over whether he should say it. The gentle effeminate face gave a troubled look.
“I know this is something you don't wish to mention, and I did promise that if you won't mention anything about your death, I won't pursue the matter.”
Koremitsu continued with a quiet voice without looking over at Hikaru.
It was not that he did not want to know anything regarding Hikaru's family, Hikaru's death, and the reason why Hikaru lingered on Earth.
He also did have a desire to force Hikaru to spit everything the latter knew.
Hikaru certainly looked really distressed having to bear everything alone.
It was only recently that Koremitsu learned of it, that Hikaru did not close his eyes even when Koremitsu slept.
What exactly was he thinking about alone as he passed these long nights?
Whenever Koremitsu opened his eyes in the middle of the night, he would see Hikaru gaze into the darkness outside the window with his deep abyss-like eyes, the pretty face contorted into despair, his head leaning to the floor in ostensible remorse. When all of these happened,
That's enough already! Just say everything out already!
He wanted to shout.
Since you're dead already, it's alright to just tell me everything and put yourself at ease!
And yet Koremitsu swallowed this impulse back in because he made such a promise with Hikaru.
It seemed Hikaru was bearing everything alone as a redemption for his own sins.
“This isn't just your problem this time; you got Saiga involved too. Can't you just tell me what Saiga is protecting actually, even if you don't want to reveal too much?”
Koremitsu glanced aside, and found Hikaru frowning, showing a feeble look as he whispered,
...It is about my secret.”
“Your secret?”
Once that secret is revealed, a person will be destroyed because of it. That person is someone very precious to me—and thus, Asa is protecting my secret with that person in my place.”
Who exactly was that precious person? One of Hikaru's flowers? What exactly was the secret that Hikaru feared so much? That he went to such painstaking efforts to conceal it?
It’s just…a little rumor—but Lord Hikaru didn’t die from an accident, but was actually killed by someone.
Koremitsu recalled Hiina Oumi of the news club giving him a boyish look, whispering to him such a rumor. There was also the chain message that

'The murderer who killed Lord Hikaru is in Heian Academy', and this matter fogged the circumstances further.
“In other words, Saiga joined the Wisteria faction, hoping to let your stepmom beat Kazuaki, to protect that secret?”
Hikaru's face got pale as his lips quivered, saying,
Yes...but Asa's aim lies after the Wisteria takes control over the Mikados.”
“After...?”
Hikaru gave a frown.
Asa wishes to let herself be at the top of the Mikados hierarchy.”
“Can such a thing actually be done!?”
But even if it is impossible, Asa will do it, and if it is her, she might be able to do it. In that case, Asa can protect my secret under the protection of the Mikados' head, protecting the one precious to me, protecting everything important to me.”
Hikaru's face was contorted in anguish, the raging conflicts in his eyes appearing, and his tone agitated yet frail, erratic as he said those words.
But Asa is mistaken...that person and I, are not like what she thought...that person...”
Midway through his sentence, Hikaru suddenly went silent, probably because it touched a sore point for him, and continued with a look of grief.
Soon after, he closed his eyes shut, waited for his emotions to calm down, before opening his eyes again. Those eyes were filled with sorrow.
...Asa may look like the poised, stoic type, but she does have a silly personality to her...she is easily spited, acts on emotions, always remembers about the past, and fails because she is bound by past memories. To be honest, Asa really is not suited to be an authoritarian, a leader.”
The words Hikaru desperately eked out were filled with his thoughts about Asai.
If I have to say it, Asa is much happier when she is experimenting and adventuring alone. Her favorite things are the unknown creatures, imaginations, and such things, and she is a girl who did say that she wanted to be an adventurer when she grows up. She is definitely not the type to lead an enterprise, and even she herself may say that she is not interested in such things—however.”
Hikaru's hoarse voice was interrupted again, his hands ruffling his hair messily.
The summer sunlight rained down on Hikaru's face that would not cry. His messy, soft hair was permeated with a golden color as it shook weakly.
Asa always chooses a path that would hurt herself, taking the path of being an antagonist. Even now, she is walking down the path with the most hardship.”
Hikaru lowered his head.
Because I was the one who made Asa bear all of these.”
These anguished words scrubbed at Koremitsu's heart.
It is all because I left this secret behind, and because I died.”

Hikaru had agonizing thoughts regarding Asai.
And Asai had miserable thoughts regarding Hikaru.
(Damn it, I just feel a throbbing pain inside.)
There was Asai, who screamed
'His sadness, his pain, his despair—I shall bear them all!'
And as Hikaru as said, she was a stubborn, troublesome, klutzy woman.
With a pleading look, Hikaru lifted his head at Koremitsu.
I became the curse restraining Asa. Please, Koremitsu, remove me from her heart! Save her from my curse!”
♢ ♢ ♢
On the next morning,
Koremitsu was waiting for Asai in front of the Gonomiya residence.
The coolness in the morning was replaced by the stifling heat as time ticked by. Asai did not show up even as the asphalt was about to be burned.
But even so, Koremitsu’s lips scowled as he waited like a watchdog.
“Are you waiting for Miss Asai? In that case, instead of standing and waiting here, maybe you should come in and wait? I just made some fine eggplant pickles here, please try them out.”
Orime went out to greet him,
“And I suppose Miss Asai may have slipped back after seeing you standing at the door with such a terrifying look.”
While Koremitsu was rendered speechless,
“That might be possible.”
Hikaru muttered this beside him with a serious look.
“…Please pardon my entrance.”
Left with no choice, Koremitsu could only pass through the Gonomiya doors with his back slouched.
Most the Morning Glories in the garden were closed, probably because it had been a long time since the sun rose. Nevertheless, there were many of these Morning Glories in full bloom, their petals covered with the standard colors of reddish-purple and blue, creating a perfect circle. Some of the Morning Glories had their petals covered, the whites in the irises resembling little stars. Some of the petals were white, some of them growing into stinging grotesque shaped ones. All kinds of Morning Glories were grown in this garden, overgrowing.
“Please have some.”
Orime personally served the pickles and tea.
“I-I'm tucking in then.”
Koremitsu reached his hands out clumsily, and then, using the toothpick that was served to him, he picked a piece of pickle, and popped it into his mouth. The eggplant pickle felt soft, and the salt amount was just right. It was nice.
Koremitsu continued to eat as he pricked his ears for any tiny movement, searching for Asai's rhythmic footsteps.
(Saiga's always scowling at me when I eat the pickles here…)

It felt annoying at first, but since then, it had became customary for him. Koremitsu was already used to Asai's choice words for him, her displeased reaction, and the frosty voice of spite.
Certainly, without that icy stare beside him, there seemed to be something missing...
(!! I'm not a masochist here!)
He tried to defend himself in his heart.
(That person's my...nemesis...rival or something, I guess...?)
Yes, a rival.
This would be most suitable.
Because of Hikaru, she and I are always at loggerheads.
Maybe it is because we think of ourselves as the one who understands Hikaru most.
You cannot possibly be Hikaru's friend.
I do not recognize you as Hikaru's representative.
Asai had been giving Koremitsu that vicious look from the first day they met, and continued to deny him as being Hikaru's representative. Perhaps that was because Koremitsu invaded the area of work she assumed she should be doing. At this moment Koremitsu understood it all.
Hikaru sat at the veranda with his hands supporting his face, staring at the wilting flock of Morning Glories with his fleeting expression.
I made such a promise with her when we were young.
When summer vacation arrives, let us look for the Tsuchinokos, fish for the kappas, exchange messages with UFOs and play with the snowman.
The moment the Morning Glories bloom, that would be the signal of their adventure.
That is the first promise Asa and I made.
And that promise could not be fulfilled even till his death.
After Hikaru died, Asai forgot all about that first promise.
And so, she continued to keep her last promise with Hikaru in her cold, frozen heart.
Since Hikaru cannot cry, I shall not cry either.
(Damn it. Why won't that Saiga…come here.)
Koremitsu felt a sharp pain in his heart, his face contorting.
“Did you have a squabble with Miss Asai?”
A serene voice asked.
Unable to noise, Koremitsu paused as he cringed his neck back.
“Well, to put it, we often quarrel…she really is good at making others angry.”
Koremitsu muttered back, and upon hearing that, Orime listened intently,
“Miss Asai is similar to me, no?”
Once she made sure Koremitsu was silent, she whispered quietly.
“Really...? You seem far better than Saiga, granny.”
Upon seeing Koremitsu look so surprised, Orime narrowed her eyes slightly and let out a chuckle.

“When I was younger, I was often told that I was obstinate, that my replies to every person is very cold, that I am an annoying woman. There were also others who said that I was haughty, so rational, and not cute at all, that nobody would marry me.”
“You got to be kidding me. That's unbelievable.”
Would people actually mellow out in personality along with their age?
(No, that old man at my house scares the neighbors from time to time when he goes out for a stroll. Even now, he continues to have a grudge against my grandma who left him 20 years ago.)
Orime looked into the distance with a nostalgic look.
She probably was thinking back to the time when she was of a similar age as Asai.
“After I got married with my husband, he would sigh and lament, 'I heard that you are not cute, but you really are not cute in any way'.”
“Isn't your husband too rude?”
“He is an aloof, insolent man, but exceptionally upright. His verbal etiquette is also very crude. 'Are you not hated? We are even here.' that was what I often retort with. Both of us were betrothed to each other, and we were squabbling every single day...”
But even so, Orime was pleasant in her look and tone, filled with affection.
Was it because of the amount of time that passed? Or was it because both of them had a mutual thing they desired in their hearts even as they argued?
Koremitsu did not understand a woman's heart very well, but he had a feeling the answer was the latter.
Hikaru too stared at Orime with a tender look.
Orime told Koremitsu that her husband died due to falling rocks from a mountain.
It was less than two years since we were married
, she sounded really depressed when she mentioned this, looking really serene.
And so, as a widow, she raised her child painstakingly, yet that son of hers got into a great dispute with her because of marriage issues, left home, and never made contact with her.
“My son and I...were rather obstinate, I suppose. He had a face resembling his father, yet he inherited my personality...”
10 years later, a person informed Orime of the deaths of her son and his wife, leaving behind a 2-year-old grandson.
“I was extremely harsh, and my grandson was never close to me ever since I took him in and started living with him...even now, it seems he is petrified of me. But even so, he does bring his wife to accompany me...”
Koremitsu recalled the granddaughter-in-law who was aloof and haughty to both Asai and him, informing Orime to 'take her medicine'.
It was truly impossible for the trio to live together in harmony.
But Orime herself did not change her expression.

“My parents…and my siblings, my husband, my son…they all died earlier than I did…the Morning Glories in this garden are the only ones left, scattering their seeds every year, blooming at regular tunes, The first Morning Glory that bloomed in this garden was the one my husband bought from a floral market. I remember back then, when I found myself unable to help but say 'ah, what a wonderful blue', and my husband made a snide remark, saying 'yup, as blue as the relatives you talked down'. The next morning, I found a pot of the Morning Glories I liked lying on the corridor…”
Orime revealed the smile of a young girl.
“That person really was bad with words…a troublesome person.”
She spoke so cheerfully.
“It was really intriguing. Both of us were at loggerheads all day, and we were not passionately in love like how the world dictates, but after my husband died, I found myself longing for him more. And so, whenever summer came, the Morning Glories bloom, and I remember the first pot of Morning Glories he gave me.”
Orime's smile became more radiant, her eyes showing a gentle expression.
Her lover was someone she could only reminiscence in her memories.
But even so, whenever she remembered his face, his voice, his actions, she probably felt as she she would melt into blissfulness.
For example, Koremitsu's mother, who wept as she kept apologizing to him 'I'm sorry, Mitsu', that mother of his who abandoned Koremitsu while he was still in elementary school, vanishing into the other end of the darkness; perhaps she would be like Orime, one day reminiscing about such events.
I hope she can do so.
Koremitsu earnestly prayed.
Hikaru, staring at Orime with a pained, clear expression, definitely would have the same feelings as Koremitsu had, hoping that this pain in his heart would become dazzling pretty one day.
Orime looked over at the Morning Glories, seemingly hoping to look for something within as she showed a faint expression, muttering forlornly,
“The first time Mr. Hikaru came to visit my house, it was when the Morning Glories were about to bloom…”
Hikaru's eyebrows quivered slightly, his expression filled with reminiscence and gloom.
“That time, he was still in kindergarten, and hid amidst the Morning Glories with his knees tucked in as he took refuge from the boys in his class chasing after him.”
'I was a child often bullied back then.'
Koremitsu recalled Hikaru saying such things back then.
'A mistress' child'.
Some were even spiteful words.

Hikaru was so effeminately thin in the kindergarten of him Koremitsu saw, so androgynous and petite. It was likely he was easily bullied by the boys as a result.
For the first time, Orime frowned slightly.
“Mr. Hikaru had to learn of his own circumstances at such a young age, and with his mother's unfortunate death, was living alone in a new house. I suppose he had to be forlorn, anguished and uneasy back then. However, he never showed anyone even a single tear. He was not trying to hold back his tears, but that he really forgot how to cry ever since he was young.”
After hearing Orime's words, Hikaru showed a modest smile.
That was a smile he would surely show whenever he was in grief, suffering miserably.
(I see...you couldn't cry even when you were a brat.)
Hikaru's profile overlapped with the memory of Koremitsu himself as the latter bawled his heart, looking completely erratic, and this caused his heart to wince in agony.
Hikaru had yet to cry.
Koremitsu himself had yet to smile.
Both of them were lonely children.
“When I went up to him, saying 'did you have a quarrel with your friends?', Mr. Hikaru shook his head bashfully, saying, 'I have no friends'. He then looked up at me, asking 'Am I a person who should not have been born? Am I a 'problem'?...”
Am I a person who should not have been born?
What feelings would a child at age 4, 5 have when saying such words?
Thinking about this, anguish again filled Koremitsu's heart.
An ordinary child would never think of such things, let alone say them out.
And this would not have happened if the people around Hikaru did not tell him 'you are a problem', 'you are a child who should not be born'.
Koremitsu was sizzling all over, furious at those who said such spiteful words.
“I could deny those words to him back then...but I do know that Mr. Hikaru was in quite the complicated predicament amongst the Mikados...and I did not think it would be wise to simply let the matter slide and pacify him.”
Orime certainly was a serious person, and she would not lie even to a child.
No, it was because he was a child that she would not lie.
And then, Orime knelt down on her knees, her eyes level with Hikaru's, staring right at him as he said.
You are still on a journey in your life, and if you want to find that answer, you have to keep walking. Even if you are unable to find that answer, even if you are feeling lost, it is fine. Do not be anxious. Take every single step, and proceed forth firmly. Perhaps you will find a correct answer at a certain point in your life in the future.
Correct answer?

Yes, this correct answer is not one others would give to you, but is something for yourself.
Can I really find such an answer?
There is a larger chance for you to find it if you go with the mindset of 'I will definitely find it', rather than 'I will not be able to find it'.
Instead of just thinking about it, would it not be easier to find beautiful blooming flowers while walking down the road with an optimistic outlook?
That is how it is.
Hikaru widened his eyes, staring at Orime's face intently, and soon broke into a smile, saying 'I understand'.
I will find a correct answer that belongs to me.
Yes. A correct answer only for you.
If I understand what that is, can I tell you that, Madam Orime?
I will be glad to listen to you.
Then, if I cannot find a correct answer…can I come by to look at the Morning Glories from time to time? They give me a place of shelter, are really gentle, and pretty too.
Upon hearing Hikaru ask this question bashfully, 'Yes, certainly', Orime too felt genial within as she answered.
From that moment onwards, Hikaru would appear at the Gonomiya residence from time to time.
Basically, Hikaru would suddenly appear on the corridor, eating the pickled cucumbers and turnips Orime made, telling her about recent events that occurred.
I have not made any male friends yet, but I am happy to have Asa and Miss Aoi to play with.
Asa and Miss Aoi are a year older than me, older sisters. That is why when I call Miss Aoi 'Aoi', she would blush and tell me angrily 'add the honorific!'. It was fine when I called Asa that however.
The boys were all playing football during break time, and they would not let me in. The girls however let me join them in playing house though.
The girls are really cute, kind and cheerful, soft like flowers. I really love flowers and girls.
I will be attending elementary school soon. It will be great if I can make a male friend.
I have yet to make a friend yet, but there are a lot of beautiful flowers in the elementary school garden, and I am made in charge of them. Also, Asa and Miss Aoi are both in the same elementary school. They come to pick me up every morning.
Hikaru would cheerfully smile, ostensibly engulfed in bright lights all the time, whenever he went to visit Orime. He would never tell her anything deflating, only about the flowers he liked, and the cousin and fiancee he got on really well with.

One of these days, I will definitely find that answer, and I can go on an adventure with Asa. I definitely must abide by the promise to go looking for Tsuchinokos with her.
It was the summer vacation during Hikaru's 4
grade, and his tone suddenly became mature and serious as he told this to Orime. At that time, his face, arms and legs showed injury wounds.
“Though he was still smiling and eating the pickles like usual...I wonder what happened back then...”
Hikaru again showed a faint smile on the corridor.
He definitely must have smiled this way to Orime too.
Orime silently awaited the looming summer and the growing Hikaru.
“Mr. Hikaru truly was a beautiful child. Whenever he was seated at that corridor, he would be dazzling brighter than the summer sunlight...I was looking forward to what sort of adult that child would grow into, what answer he would derive.”
However, Hikaru died before Orime did.
Her face, once radiant, suddenly froze, her eyes devoid of life.
Her stare was fixated upon the wilted Morning Glories, and Hikaru, being in that spot, stared back lifelessly and miserably.
However, Orime could not see Hikaru.
She sighed, and muttered.
“Again, I watched another person depart.”
Koremitsu felt a stinging pain in his heart.
He too realized that with people dying early like Hikaru, those surviving would feel miserable thinking about the memories that were made. Hikaru too looked melancholic.
Orime got up to walk towards the corridor, probably intending to head to the garden filled with memories of Hikaru, her feet stumbling, causing her to nearly fall over.
“Watch out!”
Koremitsu hurriedly grabbed Orime.
Unlike Asai, who was relatively heavy despite her slim figure, Orime was as light as cotton.
“My eyes have been dizzy recently, and my head groggy. I suppose it is time for me to be sent off.”
Orime sounded as if she was silently waiting for that day.
“Don't say such ominous things. The average lifespan's increasing.”
Koremitsu puffed his cheeks angrily, and at this moment, the granddaughter-in-law came in with a bowl of medicinal soup.
“Grandmother, you will ruin your body if you exert yourself too much.”
She glanced aside at Koremitsu, deliberately raising her voice for him to hear, and left the room.
(To think she was so polite to that Kazuaki. Now that's annoying.)
Koremitsu cursed quietly.
Orime took the bowl with both hands, and slowly drank the medicine.

“You've been drinking that medicine all this time. What's that?”
“I heard that it is the Greater Burdock tea. It is said to be able to boost the metabolism in my body. My grandchildren grew these flowers in the garden here. If I die, will they shed a tear or two at my funeral...or will they gleefully take the inheritance for investments...?”
Orime lowered her eyes as she calmly muttered quietly, slowly drinking the tea.
She sounded as if she was talking about another person.
Koremitsu frowned.
“Don't say that now.”
Orime put down the medicine in her hands, looked over at Koremitsu,
And then, she gave a clear smile,
“I do apologize here. However, at this age, I do feel that nothing does matter at this point. All those that infuriated me back then, all the unforgivable acts, they all seem like nothing much now, and then I became disinterested in whatever I am good at. Now that I have nothing I wish to do, my body and feelings have all become numb...”
Orime quietly hummed a poem,
“'Our thoughts and lamentations in this world are merely like the dew on the Morning Glories'...this is what I am thinking right now.”
“What do you mean?”
He asked indignantly,
“This world is so fleeting like the dew on the Morning Glory petals, so why do we worry so much? Why do we lament so much...?”
She answered coldly.
What do you mean, fleeting?
As Koremitsu ended up scowling more than before, Orime stared at Koremitsu with the expression of one looking ready to meet her demise, her eyes murky.
“However, Miss Asai is still young. She probably would not be able to let go of Mr. Hikaru's death no matter how painful it is, how much she mourned over it. She inadvertently felt that she had to do something for him after he died...and chose a life where she could continue living with him.”
As Orime talked about Asai, Koremitsu felt his heart bog him down.
Hikaru too winced miserably.
Her words made Koremitsu realize that even after Hikaru had died, Asai believed that she was one with Hikaru.
Release Asa of my existence,
though Hikaru did plead this of Koremitsu, was it really salvation for Asai to remove his existence from her heart?
The garden was littered with Morning Glories that were growing wildly.
They opened their petals proudly in the morning, while people were still asleep, and gradually shriveled them.
Appearing in his sights was a radiant blue, a noble purple, and a sensual white.

Regal yet sensual, outstanding yet grotesque, this garden of the Asagao Princess—
Orime, Koremitsu and Hikaru stared at the garden of Morning Glories, filled mostly with wilted flowers, with forlorn looks.
Asai did not appear at the Gonomiya residence on this day.
♢ ♢ ♢
On the next day, Shioriko's elementary school held a dodgeball tournament. As promised before, Koremitsu went to cheer for her.
Draped on his shoulders were the heavy lunchboxes and cooler box of drinks Koharu forced him to carry, and he was spectating amongst the other parents and siblings present. Standing beside him was Masakaze, tapping at the digital camera with a grumpy look.
This is the only…pachinko prize left.”
His grandfather explained to the family when he returned home the previous day, holding a new digital camera box. However, both Koremitsu and Koharu knew that he had no interest in pachinko.
It's a waste to just leave it as it is. There's no calligraphy class due to break anyway.”
And so, he followed Koremitsu,
(Aren't you the one who suspended class for this day at the last minute because of Shiiko's tournament day, gramps?)
Koremitsu wondered, but did not retort back.
And he watched Masakaze grumble and wrestle against this digital camera he was not adept at, helping nonchalantly from time to time, saying some things. However, he himself was not particularly familiar with the latest technology either.
Thus, he reasoned with Masakaze the previous day, telling him to ask Koharu for help, for she was the best at using electronics in their household since she was always working on the computer. 'how can I lower my head to a woman!' however, Masakaze roared back and refused.
Masakaze finally learned the basics of using it in the end, and then, he raised his white eyebrows, staring at the lens, ostensibly not wanting to miss out on any of Shioriko's heroics.
Soon after the match began, Shioriko was being extremely proactive.
She caught a ball that was flying straight at her, and charged forward to attack decisively. Her long hair was tied into two ponytails as usual, and now garnished with a twisted Japanese paper cord.
“That kid's really cute.”
“A pretty girl, isn't she? She's definitely a child talent, right?”
She became the focal point of attention, and her petite body, wrapped under the gym clothes and spats, was sprinting from one end to another, ostensibly not knowing the meaning of lethargy. “Ehh! I can't take photos from here!” Masakaze anxiously moved around, chasing after Shioriko's movements.
“Gramps…pay some attention to your surroundings at least, will ya?”

However, it was unknown if Koremitsu's advice was paid to heed...
(Well, at least he won't be saying things like 'dew on a Morning Glory'.)
Thinking about the events at Orime's house caused Koremitsu to be somewhat relieved, yet downhearted.
He could not contact Asai at all.
He had been calling her since the previous day, but Asai would pick up and hang up on him immediately, and this exchange continued over and over again. Such obvious rejections were worse than simply refusing a phone call.
When he called Aoi, the voicemail was the only thing answering him. Soon after however,
'Sorry, there is nothing going on here. Please do not worry about me'.
Aoi would send him such a message. In fact, this alone made her a lot better than Asai in this regard.
Hikaru too was frowning like Koremitsu as he stood by the side.
And Koremitsu felt his heart wince when he recalled the heartfelt words from Hikaru
'I became the curse binding Asai'
I became the curse restraining Asa. Please, Koremitsu, remove me from her heart! Save her from my curse!
Hikaru's wish was to pull Asai away from the Mikados' power struggle, to continue living and forgetting about him.
(But isn't Saiga's wish to protect Hikaru even if she has to sacrifice herself?)
The first promise between Hikaru and Asai.
And the last promise.
They were completely opposite.
However, Miss Asai is still young. She probably would not be able to let go of Mr. Hikaru's death no matter how painful it is, how much she mourned over it.
Orime's words echoed in his words.
She inadvertently felt that she had to do something for him after he died...and chose a life where she could continue living with him.
Once Hikaru died, the desire to continue protecting Hikaru became the pillar of support for Asai. If she were to lose it, what would happen to her?
(I'm Hikaru's friend, and it is my responsibility to hear out any of his wishes.)
However, was it best to leave Asai as she were?
Was it okay for him to not attend the calligraphy duel the next day?
On that day he returned from the Gonomiya residence and met Aoi, Koremitsu was perplexed as to whether he should help Asai in the calligraphy duel until the latter denied him. While he would not boast about it, Koremitsu had been practicing calligraphy since young, and even when Shikibu called him a delinquent, she did praise him for having such a good handwriting.
If Asai had asked him for help, he would definitely take up the offer.

Hikaru wished that Asai would pull away from the Mikados' power struggle, and if Orime gave her word to Asai, it would mean that Asai would be recognized as being a representative of the Wisteria faction. Koremitsu knew that to Hikaru, this was not what he would be delighted about.
(How would that Saiga even speak up when she hates me this much?)
Instead of being a fragile girl weeping, awaiting help from others, Asai preferred to protect Hikaru using her own power.
(But am I really going to let her bear all this responsibility and fight alone?)
Koremitsu's lips got more contorted, and the frown on his eyebrows deepened.
Right beside him was Hikaru, who too was giving a solemn look.
Koremitsu's lips inadvertently let out a sigh.
And the cellphone in his pocket rang.
It was an anonymous mail, and once he noticed the title, he felt his rage soar through the roof.
The women who were with Lord Hikaru. Third Act: 'Asai Saiga'.”
Hikaru too looked surprised, his breath bated, his expression frozen.
“Ugh, this person again?”
The first was Yū, and the second, Tsuyako.
The third time, it was Asai. Asai Saiga, Lord Hikaru's cousin, had the facade of being an honor student, the student council president. Though she pretended to be aloof with regards to Lord Hikaru but in fact, she was forcing an illicit relationship with him, dominating him to satisfy her own desires.
Lord Hikaru wished to break off ties with Asai, and Asai killed him—
Koremitsu deleted the mail without reading the rest of it.
“What kind of person delights in sending such chain mails?”
The other students in school probably received the same message and read it.
Perhaps even Asai and Aoi too--
Though one could tell from the title that it was mere harmless gossip, the directed party would certainly be hurt even if it was a lie.
“This is unforgivable.”
But why Asa...? How exactly is the person writing this message choosing the girls?”
While Hikaru muttered grimly.
“Mr. Akagi!”
A cute, cheerful voice changed the entire atmosphere.
Koremitsu lifted his head.
Dressed in a raunchy outfit of tanktop and shorts was a petite girl with large breasts, Hiina Oumi of the news club.
Her limbs were wrapped in bandages, and there was a bandage stuck on her face. However, she was smiling heartily at Koremitsu with her large eyes.
“Ahh, I got injured because of some stupid things. I'm recuperating.”

“Are you sure you're alright coming to such a place? It'll be bad if you knock into someone and injure yourself while falling over. Anyway, what stupid thing did you do that caused you to be so wounded?”
“Ahaha, there was a dangerous scoop, and I got beaten up while getting my material.”
Koremitsu again widened his eyes, and Hikaru too opened his mouth wide.
“Aren't you a girl? Stop being so reckless!”
“Ah, you're worried about me? Thanks!”
“That's not funny in any way! Goodness!”
Hiina gave a frivolous smile as she looked back at Koremitsu, who was really infuriated. And then, she leaned forward, grinning,
“It's really nothing.”
She blinked her eyes in a boyish manner,
“I got what I wanted anyway. These little injuries are nothing.”
Koremitsu stared at the busty girl with a childish face, yet has an intelligent appeal.
Was she such a mature person? Was her speech mannerism so deep before? She used to be yapping away all the time, never one to be apologetic even when bothering others, utterly fearless.
“Actually, I have an important piece of news to tell you, Mr. Akagi. The president will be faced with an arduous trial tomorrow.”
“Huh? Are you some weird fortune teller?”
Koremitsu looked completely astounded, shocked within.
The next day would be the calligraphy duel against Kazuaki.
(Does that Oumi know something after all?)
With an innocent look, she said,
“It's not a fortune, but a prophecy! This trial has already begun though, it seems.”
She said, showing her cellphone screen to Koremitsu.
Shown on it was the exact same message Koremitsu had read.
“Such news are really tasteless. There's no objectivity in such news. All the words include the grudges and hatred of the women Lord Hikaru got involved with. As a member of this industry, I can only find this laughable.”
Didn't you gossip about me a lolicon before? A vengeful spirit of delinquent?
Koremitsu had the urge to retort back.
“But can president Saiga remain calm after reading this message?”
However, he swallowed his words back in after hearing Oumi's serious tone.
Hikaru too listened intently, looking extremely worried.
“The Matriarch Asa will suppress her emotions and force herself to calm down, but she is a woman after all, one with great mood swings. If a part of her collapses, everything else will follow suit. You better support her well, Mr. Akagi.”
(What exactly...is she.)
Koremitsu was left confounded.
“Please help her.”

Hiina whispered,
“In place of brother…”
And continued.
However, Koremitsu did not hear the entire line clearly,
(What do you mean, oh bother?)
Just when Koremitsu was still thinking about what Hiina meant, she gave an earnest smile and a wink.
“Oh yes, I'll leave Miss Shikibu to you.”
Stupefied, he turned back frantically.
And he spotted Honoka slightly distanced from the crowd.
Once her eyes met Koremitsu's, she widened her eyes in fright, and then looked around, ostensibly wondering if she should run away.
And for that reason, Koremitsu hurriedly ran over to Honoka.
Having lost the chance to escape, Honoka looked up at Koremitsu with an awkward expression.
Koremitsu, being Koremitsu, approached her anxiously, but had no idea what he wanted to say. In his panic, he opened his mouth, but no words came out.
Do you think…I can like you?”
He recalled Honoka's voice as she said this to him, her large eyes teary, and his face sizzled red as a result.
Honoka's face was similarly beetroot, and she said,
“Erm, I heard that Shiiko's having the dodgeball match today. I came to support.”
Koremitsu's eyes revealed some surprise as he nodded.
“Well, I've been busy recently…haven't had time to do my homework.”
(Why am I talking about some excuses here? Don't I have other topics to talk about?)
However, Koremitsu could only think about Asai, Asai and Asai at this point.
“Erm—well…there's a certain person going further down the wrong path, and I can't get that person back no matter how I called out.”
He said with some desperation.
Honoka was stunned.
Ahh, what am I saying here?
However, what he said could not be taken back. Koremitsu could only lean forward, saying,
“But that person just can't see any path other than the one in front of her, and insists that finishing that path is something very important. What do I do with such a person? Do I grab that person by the chest, and pull that person back in? Or do I honor those wishes and watch that person walk till the very end?”
Honoka looked very perplexed, but she witnessed a serious-looking Koremitsu raise his eyebrows and widen her eyes,
She pondered, and answered,
“How about walking with that person?”

These words felt like a refreshing breeze in a sealed, humid room.
Koremitsu widened his eyes as he looked back at Honoka.
Beside him, Hikaru too revealed a similar expression.
“If you're going to be troubled and remain where you are, that person's just going to drift away from you, right? You may end up losing sight of that person after everything happened, never able to find that person. How about you follow instead of waiting and regretting? If anything happens, you can help that person, and that person might listen to your suggestions. If it's me, I'll definitely follow.”
Hikaru's lip gradually broke into a smile, his stiff face easing up.
The darkness in his eyes was slowly dissipated by the bright light.
(Ahh, yes.)
Koremitsu's heart too was brightened like the summer sky.
The important thing was not for him to deny nor watch, but to follow that person and follow her until the very end.
This is definitely the right answer for us now.
Koremitsu reached his hands out, grabbing Honoka by the shoulders,
And lowered his head while she was still flustered.
“You're really my Heliotrope.”
Her face was beetroot as she muttered. It seemed she just said what she thought of.
However, there was no one more reliable he could talk with. He finally understood the reason why her blog was popular. It was great that he could be Honoka's classmate, for she was not terrified of him, and was able to talk to him as an equal. It was really great to have Honoka around!
Her face was blushing,
“I-I'm going to cheer for Shiiko now!”
She spoke with apprehension, and left.
Filled with thanksgiving and heartfelt emotions, he watched Honoka leave.
He then pulled out his cellphone, dialed Asai's number, and placed the phone at his ear.
After several beeps, Asai picked up the phone.
And before she could cut it off, Koremitsu declared firmly with vigor.
“I'll definitely go tomorrow!”
Asai did not answer.
But Koremitsu did hear a sigh of hesitation before the line was cut off.
He put down the phone, and looked down.
Standing there was Hikaru, giving a tender look, his blond hair swaying in the wind.
Both of them exchanged looks.
Is this alright?
Hikaru grinned in a dazzling manner.

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 6

It was the morning of the calligraphy duel. Both Koremitsu and Hikaru were feeling the same.
“Alright, time to get writing!”
I shall leave it to you, Koremitsu. I will dress up in some costume and cheer you on!”
“Ugh, forget about the tennis outfit, Heian outfit or Greek mythology look.”
Then, how about I dress up in an ancient, honorable high collar uniform?”
“Just watch with a normal uniform. That's the best way to cheer me on.”
This exchanged occurred as they walked out of the corridor. And then, they found a pitch black car parked in front of the door.
That is Asa's car.”
And Koremitsu got into a defensive posture.
However, it was not Asai who walked out of it, but the chauffeur dressed in a black suit and white gloves.
“Lady Asai has ordered me to welcome you.”
He bent his body politely, in a refined manner, and opened the back passenger door.
Perhaps Asa changed her mind because of yesterday's phone call?
Koremitsu, you really are manly and cool there. Asa may be very aloof, but there definitely is a maiden called Asa who believed in Santa Claus inside that wall of ice.”
“What are you saying now. A maiden Saiga? Thinking about that gives me goosebumps.”
But leaving aside whether it was a bait dangled in front of him, Koremitsu certainly did feel uneasy about Asai having to fight Kazuaki alone. Certainly, this might be her way of asking him for help. Of course, such a stubborn person would never grovel her head and ask others for help with a teary look.
“Guess I got no choice.”
Koremitsu raised his nose and snorted, looking like a dog that was praised for an outstanding job of fetching a lost item. He then sat inside the car, slumping his back on the soft seat.
This was the second time Koremitsu took this car, the previous time being when he had to rush to Kazuaki's villa to save Aoi. He could not concentrate on the softness of the seat the last time, but this time, he could enjoy it a little.
However, the vehicle was moving slowly at a speed that would not reach the Gonomiya residence quickly.
Koremitsu, this seems strange for some reason.”
“Hey, where exactly are we going now?”
“It seems there was a last minute change of venue.”

“Let me off here.”
“We are on the expressway at the moment. Please wait for a moment.”
And such an exchange occurred.
“Please get off now.”
The chauffeur opened the door, and appearing in Koremitsu's eyes was a lush forest and a wide grassland.
Speechless, he looked around.
“I shall be picking you up once the meeting is over.”
And the vehicle drove off in front of Koremitsu.
“How in the world am I supposed to write at such a place!”
Hm, Asa is Asa after all.”
“Aren't you just saying something completely different from what you said before? There can't possibly be a maiden Asa in that ice wall after all! I'm dumped here now, no!?”
◇ ◇ ◇
At this point, that wild hound who feared nothing would certainly be cussing away somewhere in the hills.
I'll definitely go tomorrow!
Asai faltered when Koremitsu said this over the cellphone the previous day. She had ignored him to such an extent, yet that man remained so annoyingly persistent.
As she found him too annoying, too infuriating, the noise continued to echo not only in her ears, but also in her chest. If she were to continue hearing that voice, she would lose the ability to decide calmly.
And so, she decided that on the next day, she would send him as far away as possible
She just received the news from the chauffeur that he had sent Koremitsu into the hills. It seemed there was no vehicle or human to be seen, so it would be hard for him to hitch a ride.
With that, she would be able to focus on her duel against Kazuaki.
Firmly believing this, she opened the doors to the Gonomiya residence. She sat on the tatami in a seiza, her back straightened as she quietly waited for the showdown to begin. However, her heart was as anxious as ever.
All sorts of thoughts appeared in her mind,
“I'll help fulfill your promise with Hikaru!”
whether it was Koremitsu,
“Leave me alone!”
whether it was Aoi,
“Since Hikaru is dead, how about living for yourself for a change instead?”
or Tsuyako.
And also, there was a young Hikaru's face.
You are so smart, Asa. You know so many difficult words.
There was the cute, innocent, angelic cousin who abruptly appeared in front of Asai one day.

Asai said that she wanted to grow up to be an adventurer, to unravel the mysteries of the world, to exchange messages with UFOs, to travel in space. Hikaru never laughed at her for any of these.
I too want to look for Tsuchinokos, and try fishing for kappas with cucumbers, try riding on UFOs, and see how Earth is like from space.”
It was the summer vacation when Hikaru was in 3
grade, and Asai in her 4
Both of them had a promise to go on an adventure.
Keep it a secret from Aoi. She has a frail body. If she gets a bug bite, it will swell; if she sees a snake or a kappa, she will faint. If it is known that both you and I went out to play, Aoi will pout and not listen to us.”
I understand. I will keep this a secret from Miss Aoi.”
Then, let us meet here tomorrow morning.”
Sure! When the Morning Glory blooms, that will be the signal for our adventure!”
However, the initial promise Hikaru and Asai had was never fulfilled.
Hikaru did not return home on the night before that meeting.
The children who bullied Hikaru locked him in the school storage room.
When the teaching staff discovered him and rescued him, he was already covered with wounds all over.
They were all scrapes and such, but Asai felt her heart rip apart when she saw Hikaru's pure white skin littered with such wounds.
Hikaru said that he accidentally walked into the storage room, got locked inside, and could not got out.
Why will you not tell the truth?
Asai was raging, but he calmly answered,
But it is my fault. Mr. Yuuji and the rest said so. They said I am 'not a child to be born', and they said that I am not reflecting on my actions because I cannot cry. They would not let me out until I did cry.”
And so, he smiled forlornly.
But Asa, I...cannot cry.”
The Morning Glory, which was supposed to be the signal for their adventure, had completely wilted.
In place of this promise that was not fulfilled, Asai and Hikaru made a new promise.
In that case, I shall not cry either.”
That was the final, strongest promise.
She wanted to gain power to protect Hikaru.
She would no longer have the dreams only children would have. She sealed the future she had mapped out.
She decided to look at reality coldly, without letting her guard down, all to protect Hikaru.
A Hikaru who would not cry.
He continued to smile in front of others, acting as if nothing miserable had happened to him—

however, I know that this is not the case.
Hikaru will definitely continue to maintain a smile in front of everyone else.
Thus, I shall protect Hikaru.
To prevent his beautiful skin and pure white heart from being hurt again, she would gather power and climb higher.
Ever since then, she received everything in the name of the elders, and never let off anyone who blamed Hikaru in any way.
However, everything changed due to Hikaru's death.
When she heard of Hikaru's drowning at the river near the villa on that night, her vision became dark due to despair, ostensibly hearing the sounds of the torrent that gulped Hikaru in.
(I was unable to protect Hikaru's heart.)
Even after giving up her entire future, she was unable to save that most important existence.
And that was why she had to protect the last thing Hikaru left behind—
But was this really the best way?
Was there really nothing wrong about it?
You promised to look for Tsuchinokos with Hikaru, right? He's been
Koremitsu's words appeared in her mind again, her chest searing like a hot poker
Having done everything for Hikaru's sake, did Asai not make a single mistake?
Was that the reason why Hikaru was in such despair? Such anguish? Did he not die because he was completely hapless?
The reason why she carelessly revealed a smile at Hikaru's funeral was because she was relieved that Hikaru was finally liberated from the place where he was tightly bound to, completely hapless.
Why was it that even after becoming such a person, she was unable to bring Hikaru out from that place?
When exactly did she start making mistakes?
Every single night, she would see Hikaru,both young and grown up, appearing in her eyes whenever she was depressed, looking back at her silently. They did not plead for help, and they did not shed tears. They were simply looking over in Asai's direction calmly.
(Did I do something wrong after all? I should have saved you earlier, should I?)
No, perhaps she might get taken advantage of by Kazuaki if she were to deny herself till this point. Even if Hikaru died, the promise that day would still remain in her heart. If she did not fulfill it, it would continue to throb furiously in her heart, and if that was fulfilled, she would not need her future.
Asai's eyes filled with vigor as she straightened her back.
“Mr Akagi is not here?”
Orime asked.
“He will not be coming.”

Asai answered stiffly, and Kazuaki, waiting for the start in the same room, chimed in,
“Eh? A lover unwilling to help in times of crisis? I never thought Mr Akagi would be such a ruthless person. Ah, since you are so strong and wise, he definitely believes that you are fine being alone, little Asai. Either that, or he is giving me a handicap.”
He spoke with an amicable expression, but Asai ignored him.
“Is that so...”
Orime however looked on worriedly, before breaking into a tranquil smile.
“Let us begin then. I shall now introduce the judges. Please come in.”
The sliding screen rattled.
Orime slid it aside, and there appeared a tall male with his back straightened, dressed in a fine tailored suit, together with a young, slender lady.
Once she noticed the duo, Asai froze.
The man was Masayuki Tōjō, Shungo's father, the current head of the Tōjōs. Till this point, he was a reliable partner of Asai's group—and currently, the leading vanguard of the Rose faction pushing for Kazuaki to be the successor.
(So Tōjō is a judge for the duel between Kazuaki and me?)
Masayuki was a realist, for better or worse. He did not put in too much emotions to his naive, idealistic son, and was a man who could calmly analyze the situation and take action.
That was why he was able to switch over from the Wisteria faction to the Rose faction without hesitation. What prompted him was not emotion or stubborn will, but cold, calculated decision making.
Instead of which word was good or bad, it would be correct of him to choose whose word in this situation, and how it would affect future developments. His decision would affect all the aspects.
Masayuki thought about everything with regards to the decision benefitting Kazuaki.
This was a disadvantage to Asai.
However, the one worrying Asai more than Masayuki Tōjō was the other judge—Fujino Mikado.
(I never thought she would be called in—)
No. Since Masayuki, an overt supporter of Kazuaki, was called in to be a judge, it would be fair to call in Fujino, who was of the opposing faction.
But she—Fujino, had an excessively close relationship with Hikaru, and they had similar appearances.
There was an age difference of more than 20 years between her and her husband, the head of the Mikados, and even though she was young, being in her 20s, one would mistake her elegant figure and transient appearance as being a girl in her teens if he did not pay attention.
Having done that, there was an increasingly striking resemblance to Hikaru.

Hikaru and Fujino were stepson and stepmother, nephew and aunt.
Hikaru's dead mother was the older half-sister of Fujino, who was conceived from a mistress. And both of them looked alike, the head of the Mikados had high expectations of them. It was natural that Hikaru would resemble her, for he inherited his beautiful mother's looks completely.
And Fujino, having appeared in front of Asai's eyes, was like a heavenly girl dressed in a feather coat, dancing as she descended.
Everything seemed so fleeting, so temporal, so clear. She had a feminine grace, extremely refined.
The most beautiful woman in this world—

Who exactly said this about Fujino?
She had fine eyebrows, crystal look, thin lips and snowy white skin. There was also fluffy, silky light brown hair draped from her shoulders to her chest.
If basked under light, that hair would probably be dyed golden—like Hikaru.
Asai's heart was wincing in agony.
No, I have to calm down no matter what.
She forced herself to look away from Fujino, and re-exerted strength in her back and solar plexus.
Orime in turn explained the rules.
Asai and Kazuaki would take turns writing words, and in the end, the judges would choose the best of them.
“Well, it is nerve-wrecking having to write words while old man Tōjō and Miss Fujino are watching, no?”
Kazuaki spoke with a self-conceited expression.
For Kazuaki, Fujino was the woman who was taken in as the second wife after his mother, Hiroka, left the Mikados. It was to be expected that he did not have good feelings about her, but his ramblings and expressions betrayed no signs of negative emotions regarding Fujino, and he did not falter in the slightest.
Because Kazuaki did not know about that matter…
The calligraphy duel began.
Asai and Kazuaki were seated side by side in the spacious room.
And laid out in front of them was ink, inkstone, and penbrush.
Orime, Masayuki and Fujino were seated at a position by the side, where they could spectate over Asai and Kazuaki.
Amidst that, Orime's grandson and granddaughter-in-law could be seen.
They were in colludes with Kazuaki. The Gonomiya's fortunes was tightly managed by Orime herself, and they could not use it freely. It seemed they were involved in some strange investments, resulting in their financial difficulties, and Kazuaki probably said some enticing words to them. They definitely were around to support Kazuaki.
“Now then, please begin, Miss Asai.”
Orime said.

“Please excuse me.”
Asai bowed politely, took the penbrush, and wrote a word on the Japanese paper.
She cautiously lowered the tip of the brush, tensed herself, and wrote an intricate word.
Then, she placed the completed word in her hands, and went to the judges.
“My first word is 'Secluded(□□)'. The room Lady Orime resides in has a tranquil view that shows a serene mood.”
“As expected of you to know of such a difficult term, Miss Asai. The word is pretty too.”
Masayuki sounded very impressed.
“This truly is like you Miss Asai. A clever and neat word.”
And Fujino too expressed her thoughts with a calm, quiet voice.
“Secluded—that is one of the words I like.”
Orime smiled.
“It is my turn now, I suppose? Please excuse me.”
Kazuaki finished a word easily.
And then, he showed the written word for Orime's group to read.
“'Green hills(□□)— a continual series of green peaks. It is fine to remain leisurely within the house, but it is fine to go out at times and see the green hills, I suppose? I will be willing to accompany you at any time, if you wish.”
He spoke sweetly with a refreshing smile.
“Yes, I suppose. The hills are green and beautiful.”
Orime too had a fine impression of it.
Masayuki looked pleased at Kazuaki's polished counter.
This duel was not to be settled simply on how good or bad the word was written.
It also involved the words used, the meanings hidden within them, the artistic appraisal, and also the comprehensive and insight abilities for those reading the words.
The second word Asai chose was 'Blue skies' (□□).
“Lady Orime's heart is so vast and free like this blue sky. Even when she is in the garden of this house, she is able to understand how vast and limitless the sky is.”
She praised Orime, deriding Kazuaki in the process.
But Kazuaki did not fault as he calmly wrote his word,
Youthful rain (□□).
“Lady Orime's mercy is so vast, like this rain of blessings. Please allow this comfort and eleganceto rain upon our hearts.”
And so, the duel continued.
'Fleeting moment (□□)', Morning Calm (□□), 'Purity (
)', 'Translucent (
)', 'Greeting the stars (
)', 'Wander (
)', 'alignment (

)', There were many words laid on the tatamis like
When Asai wrote the word 'sincerity(
)' and explained her logic, Kazuaki wrote the word 'Reflux (
)', saying that there is only one source of all river flowers, and after going around and around, it wold return to the same source. He spoke with a voice similar to Hikaru's, that as the eldest son, it was logical that he was to take over his father.
The duel was not to be determined just like that. Though she would not lose if this kept up, she wanted to deal a decisive blow to assure victory.
After thinking about it, she wrote,
“Like the magpies that gathered to form a white bridge for Altair and Vega to be together, please allow my wishes to be connected.”
These words were more direct than anything she had said before.
Orime's name came from Vega of the Weaver Festival, Tanabata. The moniker 'Asagao Princess' also referred to Vega. Perhaps there were thoughts or recollecting about Tanabata.
Amongst them, which bird exactly would tug at Orime's heartstrings?
“Magpie...the beautiful white bird...that helps lovers.”
Orime muttered with strong feelings.
“I really love this bird.”
Those words caused Asai's heart to throb. If she were to continue writing words related to Tanabata...
“Hm, this is to be expected of you, Asai. In that case, I shall”
Kazuaki again moved his pen fluently.
“Yes, it is done.”
The moment he submitted he submitted his word, Orime's face froze.
Masayuki and Fujino both looked perturbed.
And Asai frowned when she saw Kazuaki's word.
He had been giving lavish praises to Orime all this while, writing words that anyone hoping to be the head of the Mikados would write.
One had to wonder, what exactly was Kazuaki planning in writing such a bleak word?
(Has he given up on winning?)
Or was it that he was thinking of showing off a trick?
Orime's face froze.
“This is the first Morning Glory in this house, am I correct?”
Kazuaki asked, and Orime nodded,
She suddenly became quiet, showing a lovely look.
“This was the name of the blue Morning Glory my deceased husband bought for me at the floral market...”
(I have been had!)
Asai felt like biting her lips at this point.
Orime was blinking her moist eyes.
This was the proof that Kazuaki's word touched her heart.
And this was the trump card he had.

He used this move at such a moment.
It was perfect.
Masayuki nodded in approval, and Fujino too appeared impressed as she looked over at Kazuaki.
Kazuaki spoke with a sympathetic, tender voice,
“I suppose you must be really depressed that your husband and son departed before you. I do feel the same way, Lady Orime, when I lost my younger brother.”
Asai's cheeks froze.
He actually talked about Hikaru at such a moment.
Kazuaki actually talked about feeling the same when it was the child of the mistress he despised. There had to be a limit to his obfuscating folly.
“I do regret a lot now that it would have been better if I had become more intimate with Hikaru. He is the only little brother I have on this world after all.”
Kazuaki talked about Hikaru with a voice similar to the latter. Asai's skin was pricking, her body sizzling.
Kazuaki intended to rattle Asai.
She would lose if she were to listen to Kazuaki's words head on.
However, the pretentious words of mourning, coupled with the voice similar to Hikaru, crept into Asai's ears, and she felt her chest tighten, ostensibly ripping apart.
“There is a saying that beautiful things would attract misfortune, and perhaps Hikaru was fated not to live so long after all. To an ordinary person like me, he was so languid, so carefree, and I really cannot help but worry…”
That is enough, stop despising Hikaru.
Do not let me hear that voice similar to Hikaru.
“Hey, little Asai, Hikaru did cause you quite a lot of troubles, no? I did receive an anonymous message that you have an illicit affair with Hikaru, though I do believe this is just some baseless rumor after all.”
Did Kazuaki see the exact same slandering message Asai's cellphone received the previous day?
It was a crude, imaginative message, purporting that Asai killed Hikaru out of love.
But there definitely was no way any romance could occur between them!
Don't you want to be Hikaru's 'most beloved'?
Such crude words inadvertently echoed deep within her ears, and her heart again was overcome with a tearing sensation.
(That is not the case.)
She never thought about becoming Hikaru's lover.
She never thought about being one of the many useless flowers who could only be loved by him, not even once—
Upon seeing a speechless Asai bite her lips firmly, Kazuaki turned over to Fujino this time.

“Miss Fujino, you too must have been distressed when Hikaru died.”
Asai's breathing paused for an instance, her ears fixed on Fujino's words.
Fujino spoke calmly with a lovely, tranquil voice,
“During these few years...I hardly had any interesting with Mr Hikaru. As you all knew, I was ostracized by him.”
Those words—
Asai fell into a frenzy when she heard those words.
The swirling heat in her convened at one spot, ostensibly ready to explode immediately as she lashed out,
“DO YOU REALLY THINK THAT WAY!?”
All the people present in the room looked over at Asai, flabbergasted. She however did not stop, the pain and anguish surging in her throat as she vented her fury upon the beautiful woman who resembled Hikaru so much.
“If you were not around, Hikaru—maybe he could have continued living.”
Yes, Love killed Hikaru.
Hikaru's wishes.
Hikaru's hopes.
On that day, Hikaru,
His 'most beloved'.
“Miss Asai.”
Orime called out sternly.
The voice, sounding extremely dignified due to age, caused Asai to gather herself again.
“...Pardon me for my verbal gaffe.”
Fujino muttered a few words softly, and turned her head aside again.
“No...if I did not wed over, Hikaru may not have left the house...”
The room became extremely quiet.
Masayuki looked perturbed as he frowned, and Kazuaki looked back and forth at Asai and Fujino, probably thinking about something.
Orime asked Asai concernedly.
“Miss Asai, if it is inconvenient for you, how about a break for today?”
She held the penbrush clumsily.
If she were to stop the match here, the rumors would immediately circulate in the Mikados and between the associates. When that happens, nobody would trust Asai.
There was no way out other than to fight it out against Kazuaki and beat him.
“I will write.”
She hushed her voice as she answered.
However, her hand was trembling, and she was unable to write.
What word do I write now?
What is the correct answer?
I do not want Hikaru to be hurt again. I want to protect him. But he is suffering so much.
I know that, but I am still unable to save him.

Is there still meaning in continuing this battle? Is Hikaru really hoping for this?
The young Hikaru, the 15
year old Hikaru, the thoroughly wounded Hikaru, the tragic looking Hikaru, the Hikaru who got swallowed by the tide, the Hikaru who winced in agony; all of them appeared in her mind one by one, and her vision got blurry, her trembling hands unable to stop.
She did not know anything!
The instant the black ink landed on the white paper.
The siren of the police patrol car could be heard.
And there was a loud commotion approaching them, seemingly stopping in front of the door.
“Did something happen?”
“I shall have a look.”
The moment the granddaughter-in-law stood up, the noises of commotion and shocked servants exclaiming in surprise could be heard. Suddenly, the sliding door opened.
Standing at the spot every person was looking at was a boy with messy red hair, a sharp glare, his hands on the sliding door, his feet spread far apart.
It was Koremitsu Akagi.
He looked at Asai's face and hands, and shouted,
“Hey, Asa! What can you write with those hands!?”

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 7

After pushing away the sliding door furiously with both hands, Koremitsu saw Asai's tense, grim face, the hand holding the pen still trembling.
He went through a lot of troubles from the moment Asai plotted to have him left in the hills, all the way till the moment he got to this place.
He found a bicycle with its tires punctured nearby, rode on it, and pedaled so hard it felt as if flames were soaring out of his eyes and nostrils. This resulted in a police siren approaching from behind, 'hey, stop!' the policemen inside shouting at him.
It seemed there was a report that a savage looking youth was going berserk on a bicycle at the hills.
One of my family members got killed! Some trouble happened!
After lying about such things that never occurred, he was sent here on the patrol car.
The calligraphy duel had already begun, and looking at Asai at this point, it was obvious that she was currently at a disadvantage.
But what mattered was that it was not over yet.
“What can you write with those hands!”
Koremitsu yelled at Asai, and the latter's frozen face looked ready to explode into anger, tears, turmoil. All sorts of emotions were betrayed by her face.
(Now then, let's begin.)
He looked at that face, and took a step forward.
Do not go any further. Koremitsu...”
Suddenly, an anguished voice rang beside him.
Koremitsu stopped.
He glanced aside, and found Hikaru with his head in his hands, looking extremely pale as he quivered. It was a timid, feeble expression, seemingly yearning for something as he stared at a woman.
It was the extremely beautiful woman seated beside Orime.
(Hikaru—!?)
No, that was not Hikaru.
However, Koremitsu did see this woman who resembled Hikaru so much, whether it was the white skin, the slender neck, the refined eyebrows, nose and lips.
He first saw her at Hikaru's funeral.
Back then, that beautiful lady was dressed in black clothes, her head lowered emptily, her eyes filled with clear tears as she smiled silently.
The second time was at Shioriko's house.
She was dressed in a plain blouse and skirt, watching the Purple Gromwells that ostensibly surrounded her in the garden. She then slowly walked

towards flowers, seemingly caressing them as she touched the petals, her eyes filled with tears again.
The hair, seen bundled together at the funeral and Shioriko's house, was left dangling naturally this time.
She looked a lot younger with that look, giving the impression that Hikaru was there.
But in fact, Hikaru was beside Koremitsu, his head tilted slightly aside, his lips quivering as his face contorted in agony.
That was the exact same reaction as when they met her at Shioriko's home.
At that time, Hikaru fell into a panic alone, looking extremely excruciating.
Sorry, I am really sorry about that...we have to hurry up and look for Shiiko, but...sorry
He continued to apologize profusely, finally burying his face into his knees, concealing his inner heart.
And just like back then, Koremitsu was confused.
Sorry, Koremitsu…we cannot stay here. Let us return back. We cannot stay here any longer. We cannot, cannot.”
He continued to shudder and repeat his words.
(Go back? What? I don't understand what you're saying now! Who exactly is that woman!?)
That lady with an uncanny resemblance to Hikaru seemed somewhat intimidated, her expression frozen, probably because Koremitsu was glaring at her. With a soft voice, Orime explained to Koremitsu,
“These are the judges I have invited for today, Miss Fujino Mikado and Mr Masayuki Tōjō.”
(Mikado—!? And Tōjō!?)
Fujino, as in the 'Fuji' Asai had been advocating? In other words, she was the second wife of Hikaru's father, Hikaru's stepmother.
(So she's that young!?)
Both of them did not seem to have the relationship of mother and son, but more like siblings.
Hikaru stared at Fujino with fear and yearning,
“Do not go”
muttering over and over again.
We cannot be together. We cannot.”
There was no way Fujino could see Hikaru, but Hikaru was utterly terrified, as if Fujino realized his existence. Even so, he continued to stare at Fujino, ostensibly attracted to her, as he moped around on the tatamis.
Koremitsu...sorry. Sorry...I...”
I want to get away from that person as soon as possible.
Hikaru's anguished expression and voice was stating this to Koremitsu.
If they were to continue to remain here, Hikaru would probably break apart.
(But if I'm to go away now, what will happen to Asai!?)
And as Koremitsu stood there with his eyebrows raised, Asai, seated on the tatamis, was looking at him with apprehension. Her long thin eyebrows

were compacted together, and she was biting on her pale lips, looking overly uneasy as compared to usual. The black ink was dripping from the tip of the pen she was holding, spreading on the paper.
Koremitsu yelled,
“PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER!”
And Asai widened her eyes in shock.
Orime, Fujino, and all the other people present looked stunned because of Koremitsu's sudden outburst.
Kazuaki, who was beside Asai, remained still with his mouth agape.
Hikaru too stopped groaning as he lifted his head at Koremitsu.
The beautiful, dreamy eyes were pleading for help.
Koremitsu continued,
“WE'RE HERE NOW, SO WHAT CAN YOU DO IF YOU'RE SO SCARED! STOP BEING SO UNBECOMING OF YOURSELF! DON'T YOU HAVE A PROMISE TO FULFILL!? IN THAT CASE, STOP FLOUNDERING, STRAIGHTEN YOUR BACK, AND JUST DO IT!”
Hikaru too clenched his fists, trying to stop his trembling using his own strength. There was some trust and courage in his eyes that were looking at Koremitsu.
That's right, Hikaru.
Your will brought me all the way here. Your feelings of wanting to help Saiga drove me here. That's why, Hikaru,
“You're not alone!”
Hikaru lifted his head, and narrowed his eyes, giving a sacred look of respect as he listened.
And Asai was seated over there as she listened in on Koremitsu like Hikaru did. She widened her eyes, her lips quivering—and then, she frowned slowly, and bit her lips firmly. It looked as if she was hastily concealing the emotions she nearly revealed.
It seemed Asai had assumed the words Koremitsu yelled at Hikaru was directed at her.
She straightened her back.
At the same time, Hikaru stood with a clear expression, right beside Asai, ostensibly protecting her.
Koremitsu too strode forth.
He placed his hand on Asai's shoulder, and hissed as he faced forward.
“Leave this to me.”
With Koremitsu's hand placed upon her, Asai's slender shoulder shuddered slightly.
He took the pen away from Asai, and in her place, had the paper facing him.
Asai did not stop Koremitsu as she straightened her body and sat beside him, her eyes still uneasy, seemingly yet to recover.
I shall leave this to you then, Koremitsu.”
Hikaru whispered.

Orime, Fujino, Tōjō's father, all those present awaited the first word Koremitsu would write with bated breath.
Kazuaki's eyes too stared at Koremitsu's hand from beneath the glasses.
Koremitsu held the pen firmly, dipped an ample amount of ink at the tip, and did not swap out the paper Asai dirtied as he wrote on it.
He drew thick lines with much conniption.
He wrote a large word that filled the entire paper.
It was free and impudent, like a child holding a pen and writing for the first time.
And he shoved the word he wrote to Orime and the rest.
Orime, Fujino and Masayuki again showed bewilderment on their faces.
Orime's grandchildren, watching from the sidelines inconspicuously, were also left befuddled.
Kazuaki's mouth was wide open too, looking completely disconcerted. Asai widened her eyes speechlessly, and her eyebrows were raised due to anger.
“Tsuchinoko
That was the first word Koremitsu wrote.
◇ ◇ ◇
(What are you doing!? Are you making fun of me!?)
These words arouse in Asai's throat, and she nearly lashed out at Koremitsu.
What Tsuchinoko? And such an unrefined, childish handwriting, to boot!
Kazuaki, being right beside her, could not help but laugh.
“Ahahaha, your words are really bold there, Mr Akagi! I never thought about Tsuchinokos or anything, you know~?”
He said as he fluently wrote the word 'Kirin (□□)'.
“A merciful and wise Kirin does fit you well, Lady Orime.”
It was a word of elegance and intricacy, one Koremitsu's word could not compare to.
However, Koremitsu continued to remain silent as he scowled, writing,
Asai's face was gradually reddening due to shame, and her hands on her knees were not quivering because of jitters, but because of rage at Koremitsu.
(I knew I should not have asked this man for help. Why did I feel relieved when he opened the sliding door? Why did I find him reliable when he placed his hand on my shoulder?)
Asai did not know whether he was here to assist or here to ruin the situation.
I wonder if he came all the way to this place on the police patrol car just to vex me to no end.
Kazuaki looked assured of his victory as he continued to write beautiful words that had multiple meanings, whether at first glance or not.
And his flattery of Orime was going extremely well.
Tsuchinoko Park(

And Koremitsu again wrote Asai's dark history brazenly on the paper, filling it.
Asai was at her limit.
But just when she was about to complain about it, she widened her eyes in shock.
There was a smile on Orime's face.
Orime was not giving a wry smile due to shock from Koremitsu's childish words, but seemed to be reminiscing about something, sympathetic as she narrowed her eyes and opened her lips.
Fujino and Masayuki, flanking her from both sides, were staring intently at Koremitsu's direction, and not Kazuaki.
With an impassioned, fiery stare, Koremitsu stared at the paper as he wrote his words with his firm, muscular, slender arms spread wide, ostensibly scattering his sweat away.
He continued to write those robust words.
Kazuaki's words were light and thin, and this was stark contrast to Koremitsu's robust words, further emphasizing the difference.
What immediately attracted the attentions, and appeared in the sights was not the neat, tidy words of Kazuaki, but the simple, lively words Koremitsu wrote.
Asai too found herself inexplicably attacted.
(Why is my heart throbbing?)
Those words are so crude, so barbaric, like a child's handwriting.
Those words are supposed to be the one I dislike.
Morning Glory(
Koremitsu wrote.
Unlike the childish, brazen words he wrote before this, it was a neat, riveting word that oozed comfort, a textbook example of a pretty word children could look at.
Asai's heart quivered intensely again, and she felt a clamping sensation.
What a pretty word.
What a dignified word.
What a dignified Morning Glory flower.
And as she had this notion, the next word Koremitsu wrote was,
“Stubborn person
(Is he referring about me?)
While ignoring Asai's scowl, he continued to write beautiful words at ease,
'obstinate
', 'haughty
', 'conceited
' 'Mastermind
(I am just an obstinate, haughty, conceited, cold mastermind after all.)
But for some reason, when Koremitsu began writing those words, 'Deary me', 'you do not have to put it that way', even Orime was left muttering, her face reddening.

His lips curled into a frown, he wrote,
Upon seeing those words, Asai's heart pounded shrilly.
And then, there was a gentle, flowing line.
At that instance, an image of the bright summer sky appeared in Asai's mind.
In the midst of the dazzling light, Hikaru, still in his elementary school days, was smiling as he reached his pinky at him. On that day, they had their first promise together.
That was when they were extremely innocent, extremely blissful—
Fujino Mikado, spectating this duel, seemed to narrow her eyes forlornly the moment she saw the words Koremitsu wrote.
Orime again showed the fleeting, distant expression that was filled with dreams.
It was Kazuaki's turn next.
But Koremitsu put aside the 'promise' paper, and continued writing on another piece.

◇ ◇ ◇

(This is the last one.)
Koremitsu stared at the paper, and drew sharp strokes on it with indignation.
Koremitsu, who wrote so many words till this point, had no plans or strategy.
He simply wrote the words he thought of, and the words his friend, the ghost beside him, wanted to convey.
But the last word was what he had decided on.
Koremitsu did not know whether Orime would like it.
But this was the word he wanted to convey to her.
And certainly, Hikaru too—
He held the word he wrote firmly in both hands, and showed it in Orime's direction.
Orime stared at the words in shock, with bated breath, ostensibly forgetting how to move.
(Hey, granny, you said that you're like the dew on the Morning Glory, and that you don't want to do anything now, just waiting for someone to take you, right? But your journey isn't over yet! You're still on a journey!)
Koremitsu said these genuine words to Orime in his heart.
Beside him, Hikaru too showed a clear expression at Orime, saying with such gentleness,
Madam Orime once told me that I would not be able to find an answer if I do not move forth. Right now, I am still on my journey, and nothing can be done if I do get lost. She told me not to be impatient, simply move forward one step at a time, and one day, I will be able to find what I think is the correct answer.”
If I understand what that is, can I tell you that, Madam Orime?

When Hikaru asked this, Orime answered,
I will be glad to listen to you.
If it was Orime, who was able to recall such an insignificant promise 10 years ago, she should be able to understand the meaning of the word Koremitsu wrote, even if the latter did not say it.
Hikaru's wishes probably were conveyed too.
Madam Orime, please continue walking. Please do not say that your life has already ended.”
With a gentle expression, Hikaru said to Orime,
Madam Orime's path is still to be continued.”
Hikaru's voice,
Orime would certainly be able to hear it as she reads Koremitsu's words.
She lived her life vacantly till this point, but she was currently awake, reverting back to her wise expression as she said calmly,
“My journey is still yet to end, huh?”
And so, with a gentle expression, she raised her eyebrows leisurely, showing a smile. She lifted her face, and spoke poignantly with intelligent looking eyes.
“I suppose I should give Mr Akagi a prize of the highest order for the words that have taught me so.”
Asai widened her eyes.
And Kazuaki bit his lips, looking extremely vengeful.
Masayuki spoke solemnly,
“If this is what the Asagao Princess wishes for, I shall have no dispute over this.”
And Fujino too elaborated cautiously,
“I too am thoroughly impressed by Mr Akagi's words. Especially...the word 'promise'...”
Hikaru too looked to be in an arduous state when Fujino spoke, but he maintained a thin smile as he endured it.
Orime then looked at every single person.
“Now then, it is decided that Mr Akagi will be given the best prize.”
Asai looked completely incredulous.
And at that moment,
“What are you saying here? This is too strange, is it not? Why are you admitting a person who has no relation to the Mikados, and suddenly barged in, as a participant!?”
The one who stood up to yell was Orime's grandson.
Koremitsu never noticed him at all as he had such a weak presence.
(Who is he?)
He wondered.
He is Madam Orime's grandson.”
If not for Hikaru telling him this, he would have assumed the person to be one of the misters amongst the servants with quite the arrogant pomp.

And the granddaughter-in-law, biased towards Kazuaki, insisted along with her husband,
“Yes, that is too weird! Mr Kazuaki's words are elegant and beautiful!”
The grandson then gradually raised his voice,
“It must have been your body feeling unwell, grandmother. Have some tea and some rest. Hey, you over there, serve grandmother some tea.”
At this moment, Orime spoke calmly,
“I shall not be drinking your tea anymore.”
Orime stared at her grandchildren with conviction.
At that instance, both of them were spooked as they exchanged feeble glances with each other, their bodies quivering in panic.
"B-bring grandmother out of here."
The grandson ordered the servants, and the daughter-in-law gave an excuse to Fujino and Masayuki,
"Grandmother is prone to saying strange things recently."
The grandchildren did not notice the atmosphere at all because they were panicking. Masayuki gave a frown, and Fujino looked uneasy.
Koremitsu too stared at them intently.
At this moment, he heard Hikaru's voice,
The reason why you are being so frantic in wanting to excuse Madam Orime, is because you know it will be difficult for you if Madam Orime explains your schemes.”
Hikaru's tone was not sweet like usual, and there was some seething fury betrayed by his eyes, a rarity at that, as he stared at the grandchildren.
Madam Orime never said anything because she has been sheltering both of you till now, no? But!"
There was a harsh, loud voice echoing in the ears of a stunned Koremitsu.
Hikaru actually spoke in such a manner,
No matter what her true wishes are, I cannot allow this to continue anymore! Madam Orime is the one who accepted me and gave me encouragement, my savior, the Asagao Princess I so respected. If she is unwilling to speak because she is concerned about your welfare, I shall be the one condemning you to protect her!"
Hikaru's eyes were looking extremely harsh, unlike his usual self.
It is best that everyone listens to this. I will not allow you two to do anything to Madam Orime again!"
"Hey! Put your hands off granny! I'm going to let everyone hear what you did to her!"
Koremitsu too spoke loud enough for everyone in the room to hear, conveying Hikaru's words.
'Let us see what you will say this time'
Asai was giving Koremitsu a wary look, and Fujino, Masayuki, looked over at Koremitsu in shock.
While biting his lips, Kazuaki directed his stare towards Koremitsu.
The grandchildren were increasingly flustered.

"What are you insinuating that we did to our grandmother?"
"Yeah? You looking for a fight?"
They fervently refuted.
Orime stared at her grandchildren emptily, remaining silent.
Maintaining a serious look, Hikaru continued,
"Does everyone know that there is toxicity in Morning Glories? At first, the Morning Glories were imported during the late Nara period as medicine. The seeds were very effective in being diuretics and laxatives, but as they were extremely costly, there was a tale that a cow had to be exchanged for it. That is why the Morning Glory is called the 'Cow leading flower (□□□)'. As a medicine though, there was a terrifying toxic within those seeds,"
And Koremitsu in turn glared at the grandchildren, yelling,
"Do you know that the Morning Glory seeds can be used as medicine, but that they're filled with poison!?"
The grandchildren's shoulders jolted, their eyes wavering.
"Wh-what are you saying now?"
"Y-yes, why are you suddenly talking about Morning Glories? Is it not strange?"
Hikaru however continued with great clarity,
"There is one species especially amongst the Morning Glories called the Datura. It is a dangerous plant with a similar medicinal and toxic effects as the Belladonnas. There is a certain alkaloid that has numbing effects, and a few of its seeds can cause intoxication, eliminating a person of his cognitive ability. Because of this, it is used as an anaesthetic during operations."
"There's a specific troublesome thing amongst Morning Glories, called the Datura. It is used for numbing during operation, but if it's not used correctly, it'll be something bad."
"Dizziness, double vision, extreme parchness of the throat, inability to urinate, anxiety, hysteria, hallucinations; these are the symptoms that will occur, and soon after, the person will die."
"The person will have dizziness or whatever, can see two of the same thing, dry throat, anxious, hallucinating, and finally death. Do you know of this!?"
Koremitsu stared over at the duo as he approached the grandchildren immediately. Both of them cringed, continuing to shiver due to Koremitsu's terrifying glare.
And around them, Asai, Fujino and Masayuki listened to Koremitsu's words with bated breath. There was anxiety shown in Kazuaki's eyes hidden beneath the glasses.
Hikaru then pointed,
"Those dangerous Daturas are growing in this garden. Near that medicinal garden too! Is this a coincidence!?"
"Daturas are growing near the medicine plants in the garden! Do you know that!?"
"Those are Daturas."

Hikaru pointed his slender, white finger in a direction, and Koremitsu too stiffly raised his finger and pointed,
"Those are Daturas!!"
It was a little garden of medicinal plants, simply surrounded by stones. Beside it were blooming white flowers, with corrugated leaves and petals poking out. Wrapped by the vines, they were showing little spikes on the surfaces, giving off a menacing look.
The grandchildren paled.
"The Datura seeds are not the only poisonous part. Its flower, fruit, vines and roots all have toxicity. Daturas and Burdocks roots are similar looking, but it is impossible to
mistake each other
when Datura roots burrow deep into the ground, no? Is this really just an accidental mistake?"
"Datura are not only poisonous in the seeds, but also the roots! Both of you know about this, and yet you grew them there, right!?"
"The Burdock tea Madam Orime drinks is good for her body, but you two have been harvesting those things from the garden, brewing them for her every day."
"Granny drinks the Burdock tea every day, but is it really good for her body!? Maybe you weren't using Burdock to brew, but Daturas, right!?"
Orime could only watch her grandchildren forlornly whilst they were cornered.
Surely she knew.
Both about the fact that the Morning Glories growing by the medicine garden was Datura, and that her grandchildren were mixing Daturas in the tea.
When exactly did it begin?
How long exactly did it continue, that Orime continued to consume it even though it was corroding her body.
Having understood Orime's inner heart, Koremitsu felt a chill up his spine instead of fury or sadness.
(Granny, you just gave up on everything? You didn't want to live anymore?)
"The symptoms Madam Orime has, dizziness, double vision, parchness of throat, they all fit the description of symptoms caused by Daturas. If she had consumed a large amount at one go, there would be an obvious toxic reaction, and your schemes would have been revealed immediately. However, it seems that you were not anxious for the outcome. You just want to control the fortune that is available, hoping the death of your grandmother as she controls the money, shortening it even if it is little. No, perhaps you never had such radical thoughts. You simply wanted to use the Datura poison to weaken Madam Orime's body, so that her mind would not be as sharp, waiting for the day to force her to quit her position as the head of the household, control the household."

"GRANNY'S DIZZINESS GETS WORSE BY THE DAY BECAUSE OF THE BURDOCK TEA YOU GUYS BREWED! THAT CAN BE INVESTIGATED! YOU WANT TO USE THE FINANCES OF THIS HOUSEHOLD FREELY, AND FORCE GRANNY TO RETIRE, RIGHT!? YOU CAUSED GRANNY'S EYES TO BE BLURRY, SUCH THAT HER MIND'S UNABLE TO THINK RIGHT, NO? YOU'RE SAYING THAT GRANNY OFTEN SAYS SOME WEIRD THINGS RECENTLY, BUT YOU GUYS ARE THE WEIRD ONES, RIGHT!? GRANNY'S NOT THE ONE BEING STUPID! THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE!!"
While Koremitsu bellowed, the grandchildren were slumped as they pricked their ears silently, looking in Orime's direction.
Right, it's too early to retire! Granny!
You said it before, right? Your journey is still ongoing!
"We-we do not know anything about Daturas or something. We never heard of that before!"
"Y-yes! How can we know about the Morning Glory species when we are not professionals? We do not know, we do not know anything at all!"
The grandchildren yelled haplessly.
The granddaughter-in-law looked over at Kazuaki, seeking his assistance.
"Mr Kazuaki, I-I just brewed tea for her out of concern for her own health."
And Kazuaki showed the look of young, wise lord as he answered feebly,
"However, it is not a good thing to brew something for Lady Orime without knowing of the effects."
"But that is."
"Mr Kazuaki!"
The grandchildren's faces were filled with despair, knowing that they were not getting any protection.
Masayuki and Asai too stared at the grandchildren coldly.
At that moment, Orime placed her hands on the tatamis, her back facing the grandchildren.
And she gave a deep bow.
All of them were stunned as they looked at her.
She placed her head on the tatamis, and spoke solemnly and calmly,
"I have caused everyone worry because of my grandchildren's folly, and I do apologize for this. I shall focus on educating them after this, and please keep what you heard and saw today within your hearts, everyone."
There was silence in the room.
Asai and Masayuki, who had been giving the grandchildren icy glares, showed somber looks as they were affected by Orime's attitude.
Kazuaki too shrugged his shoulders.
"...It sure is a harmonious meeting today."
Fujino muttered softly, and Kazuaki too chimed in courteously,
"Yes, I too did find it enjoyable today. Please welcome me the next time too."
The grandchildren watched Orime with moist eyes.

And both Hikaru and Koremitsu gave disheartened looks as they watched Orime remain still, her head still lowered.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was after the calligraphy duel.

Left inside the room were Koremitsu, Asai, Orime—and Hikaru, the four of them.

The early afternoon sun was shining down on the Morning Glory vines and leaves.

Koremitsu had just weeded out the Daturas near the medicine garden, leaving a lumpy hole there.

Orime was seated on Koremitsu's right under the roof as the latter wiped his sweat, and Asai was seated at the left.

Orime stared at the empty spot beside the garden that was suddenly vacanted, giving a forlorn look as she muttered,

"Actually...the Morning Glory I got from my husband was not the Abyss. The Abyss is a different species altogether, and there was no such species when my husband was still alive...however, when my grandson was still young, we were looking at the Abyss growing in the garden, and I told him about the Morning Glory market 'I saw a similar colored Morning Glory with your grandfather, you know'..."

—This is a flower with both grandfather and grandmother's memories, no? Its name is called Abyss, right? How do I write it? Please teach me, grandmother.

Her grandson, who was always terrified of her, always shriveling out of self-depreciation, showed her a rare smile smile.

"And so, I answered him 'yes'."

With a twig, she wrote the word 'Abyss' on the ground for him to see.

And he brought his face close to the ground, writing the word using a twig.

As the word was too difficult for a child, he continued to tilt his head to observe, giving his utmost effort.

"...That child probably mentioned this to Mr Kazuaki. He actually could recall that old incident..."

With a crying smile, Orime whispered.

'Abyss' was not the flower she had memories of with her husband, but with her grandson.

They both lived in the same household, yet were distant like strangers, and he in the end conspired with his wife to poison his grandmother using tea—

And yet, there was such a heartwarming event between them.

Orime was probably recalling those events.

And thus, when Kazuaki finished the word and showed it to Orime, the latter showed such a tender yet forlorn look as she smiled,

"I thought that my life could end at any moment..."

Orime continued to whisper as she looked over at the garden, and Asai's shoulders jolted.

Orime slowly turned her stare in Koremitsu's direction, showing a forlorned yet refreshed expression as she smiled,
"But my journey is still ongoing. There is still a future out there, no? I want to restart everything, whether it is this garden, or my grandson."
Her expression became convicted yet optimistic, filled with life, as if those were important, valuable things she had to do.
Hikaru too gave a dazzling smile beside Koremitsu.
And Asai's shoulders relaxed, seemingly relieved.
Koremitsu too was delighted.
"Now then, what word shall I give my savior?"
And because of Orime's words, Asai's shoulder cringed again.
"I don't need one."
Koremitsu answered plainly.
Asai exclaimed in shock.
"I can't do anything even if I do have one. Ahh, but well, how about I write words with you, granny? That's enough for me."
"I see. That is an excellent proposition."
Orime narrowed her eyes.
Like Orime, Hikaru too stared at Koremitsu with clear eyes. It seemed as if he had anticipated this answer.
And Asai contorted her body, leaning forward, ostensibly unwilling to accept this resolution.
"What are you thinking? If you get the word from Lady Orime, Hikaru will —"
"Hikaru does not wish for such a thing."
With a convicted look, Koremitsu said this to Asai.
The latter raised her eyebrows, wanting to stare back. However, that expression quickly vanished, revealing a feeble one instead.
"Then...what exactly does Hikaru wish for exactly?"
This probably was the first thing Asai did not understand at all. She asked hoarsely.
And because of that feeble expression, Koremitsu was feeling unexpectedly tender.
Ah, yes, this person's a girl too.
That is why she made such a face.
The warm, tender emotions were slowly floating from deep within Asai, and Koremitsu held her hand like a fragile item.
"Come, let me teach you."
And beside him, Hikaru smiled,
"Let us go, Asa."

[Hikaru V6] Chapter 8

It was a time where the vestiges of sunset rays dyed the air golden, and Asai, having changed into comfortable clothes for moving about and thick boots for trekking, came to a hill owned by the Mikados with Koremitsu.
This was the place where Asai abandoned Koremitsu behind, and she was thus inadvertently worried as to whether he would do the same thing back to her and leave her behind at this place.
But even if he did not abandon her in such a place, she would never have considered going out alone with such a savage-eyed, barbaric man like Koremitsu when the sun was about to set. Until yesterday, that was.
She actually followed Koremitsu obediently, whom she so hated, despised just a while back.
“Now then, let's start looking for Tsuchinokos, and then we're going to the river to fish for kappas, exchange messages with UFOs, and as for the snowman. Maybe they're hiding in a
cuddling their ice pillows since it's summer. Anyway, let's start looking.”
Koremitsu looked down at a copy of his schedule and he spoke with a deadpan look.
(Why is it that I am doing such a foolish thing with him?)
You promised Hikaru, didn't you! I'll fulfill it on his behalf
Upon hearing those words, Asai had the impulse to push him down a tall building.
(It is supposedly impossible for me to recognize this wild dog as Hikaru's representative…)
First, it is going to be the Tsuchinokos after all!
Asai recalled the summer vacation where she made the promise to go adventuring with Hikaru, recalling his dazzling cheeks the cheerful voice in her mind, and her chest tightened, her mind confounded.
After that, we are going fishing for kappas at the river! We need to bring lots of cucumbers then.
How do snowmen spend the summer? Do they make an ice pillow using cooler and spend all day sleeping?
Asai handed a soap bubble blowing straw over, and he grinned heartily. That was an expression as adorable as an angel.
Aoi stared at Hikaru, her face flushed red, and when Hikaru tilted his head skeptically, she suddenly puffed her cheeks and turned her head aside. Perhaps she was unwilling to admit that she was mesmerized by Hikaru when she saw him.
And from that day on, Asai, Aoi and Hikaru were always playing together. Whenever Aoi went to Hikaru's house to play, she would definitely invite Asai along. Aoi herself wanted to play with Hikaru, but she was too ashamed to admit this 'Asa wants to go to Hikaru's place to play, and I want

to play with Asa, so I have no choice', blushing red as she insisted on this with all her mind.
Asai was astounded to see Aoi like this.
It was clear for all to see that Aoi was infatuated with Hikaru.
And she was not the only one. The other girls too were infatuated with him, mesmerized by him.
During the school arts festival, Hikaru was set to be the prince in Cinderella, and so most of the girls in the girls recommended themselves to be Cinderella. After a loud ruckus, the drama act became a comedy involving a prince and 13 Cinderellas.
And the scene of the dance hall became 13 Cinderellas surrounding one prince. Asai coldly watched the dancing girls who were dressed like flowers, and quietly made up her mind that she would not be one of them.
Even if all the girls were to fall in love with Hikaru, she definitely would never fall in love with him
However, perhaps she, who had such thoughts all this while, may have loved Hikaru after all.
Don't you want to be Hikaru's 'most beloved'?
And Koremitsu's hypothesis was most likely correct.
There was an emotion of wanting to be Hikaru's most beloved, the feeling of wanting to be Hikaru's lover deep within her heart.
But if this were to keep up, she too would end up like those girls.
And that was why she became so cold and aloof, pretending to be chaste with regards to love.
Whenever she saw Aoi fretting, furious and depressed over Hikaru's philandering, Asai inadvertently found herself thinking about how foolish Aoi was. Perhaps however, she was jealous of Aoi.
That she was jealous of Aoi's cute devotedness, that she was able to love Hikaru, that she was betrothed to marry Hikaru one day.
That whenever Aoi pouted and turned her blushing face aside, Hikaru was always there to pacify her gently with his sweet expression, and whenever she saw such a mood, her chest was prickling—she did not want to recognize that, and that was why she secretly despised Aoi for being a spoilt princess who knew nothing of the ways of the world to maintain the balance of emotions in her heart.
She was never as petite and cute as Aoi all this while, and she never wanted to be be a girl every single person doted so much that they would protect her.
And so, the dream she had when she was young was to be an adventurer. Her belief in Santa Claus was betrayed, but there was many, many mysteries in this world that one would get excited over. When she was young, she wanted to go out and observe with her own eyes, personally investigate, and unravel all those mysteries.
Her parents giving disapproving frowns, saying that she was being unbecoming of a girl.

There are many worms in the hills, and the kappas are slippery and disgusting. I think I would rather stay at home to draw after all.”
Aoi too had the same view, but Hikaru did not laugh at her,
When summer comes, let us look for the Tsuchinokos, fish for kappas, and play with the snowmen.
He said this to her, and because of these words, she added this appointment in her schedule.
Yes. Asai was not hoping to be assisted like a princess being saved and protected by a prince in fairy tales.
What she was hoping was...
“I'll go with you until the very end.”
A sudden gruff, powerful voice suddenly rang, pulling Asai back from the past to reality.
The boy with bright red hair and sharp stare said sullenly as he was was basked under the red sunset. One had to wonder if his entire face was red, including the nose, because of the sunset, or out of bashfulness.
Let us go together, Asa.
Hikaru's words again overlapped with his, and that clear, innocent voice entered Asai's ears like a refreshing, rustling breeze blowing in.
Hikaru's words, and Koremitsu's words, both riveted Asai's heart.
“Hey, where exactly do Tsuchinokos live in? In the grass? On the trees? Or in the caves?”
“How am I supposed to know about that?”
“Then investigate beforehand, model student.”
“You are the one who brought me here so abruptly!”
“Well, it's fine. Let's just look for it however we like.”
“What do you mean like that? Are you saying that you are fulfilling Hikaru's promise with just a nonchalant attitude?”
“Ahh whatever, let's get serious! We're looking for Tsuchinokos—something seemed to be slithering down there.”
“We're in the hills. There has to be snakes.”
“No, it seems to be something a little flatter.”
“How is possible to find Tsuchinokos so easily? That is something that born out of imagination after all. There is no way such a thing exists in reality—”
“Woah! It's moving again! It really looks like something with a flat belly.”
“How stubborn you are. Tsuchinokos—”
“If you're sure they don't exist, catch them first just to make sure. Hey, go over there and chase it from over to me.”
“I do not remember agreeing to that—hey, wait.”
Before she realized it, Asai found herself running on the steep hill.
It was a good thing that she had changed her footwear before this, but on a deeper thought, she wondered was exactly she was doing, and was speechless.
She, together with Koremitsu, chased after the creature that was moving at quickly, but accidentally let it slip away, and felt bitter about it. Then, she

heard the flowing sounds of the river, and walked towards there. Koremitsu tied the cucumber he brought to a twig, and dangled it over the water.
“Say, why do kappas like cucumbers?”
Hey, Asa, why do kappas like cucumbers?
“Cucumbers are necessary items for offerings to the water god, so there is the rumor that kappas like cucumbers.”
The sunset faded past the horizon, and the sky got darker. Asai placed a torchlight. The orange light shone bright upon the profile of Koremitsu Akagi as the latter continued to dangle his bait and fish.
“Ehh, you know quite a lot.”
Asa, you really are smart.
For some reason, Hikaru's face could be seen on Koremitsu's rough, gruff sidelong face.
Whenever Asai saw Hikaru's shadow on Koremitsu, her heart would pulsate shrilly, her heart bitter, ostensibly ready to burst into tears.
This finally caused her to realize the reason why Aoi, ever the fastidious one who hated men, to like Koremitsu.
Hikaru and him were so completely different, yet they were so similar.
His words, his actions, and his expression that would soften from time to time evoked the voice and profile of Hikaru.
Hikaru's friend—
Asa, I wish to have a friend.
That was one thing Hikaru yearned for so much.
Actually, I want to play with boys too. I wonder what kind of boy will be friends with me.
At that moment, Hikaru was giving her an admiring look as he narrowed his eyes and spoke up, ' I might say that it’s because you’re too much of a playboy. You should get a friend who is prudent',and when she said this so coldly to him, it was to hide the dissatisfaction in her heart.
The water surface with the reel poking out was glittering with light, quivering.
“Yo, lift your head and look.”
Koremitsu called out , and lifted his head as high as he could, looking up.
Asai too was influenced as she lifted her head.
And then, appearing in front of her was a sky filled with stars!
They blinkered in unison amidst the ink-like darkness like sands of light, glittering.
There was Vega of the Lyra Constellation, Altair of the Aquila Constellation, and Deneb of the Cygnus Constellation.
Yes, that was the Summer Triangle.
Vega was The Weaving Princes
And Altair was the Cow Herder.
In the middle of the two stars was a belt of stars. The stars were twinkling, clustered together, forming a stroke in space.
“Amazing! That's the Milky Way, right?”

And Koremitsu was showing his excitement beside her.
Ah yes! Let us see the Milky Way, Asa!
Was the sky so vast?
Were the stars so dazzling?
Asai felt as if the world was reverted back to her childhood, filled with exhilarating mysteries, and the scenery riveted her chest, rendering her breathless.
“Alright, let's call for aliens!”
“What are you saying now?”
“Heey!!! Aliens! Come here now!!”
“Stop it already! What happens if another person hears you?”
“There are three people here though.”
“Well, no, just you and me, Saiga.”
“Y-you are right.”
“Heey! Aliens!!! Come fishing for kappas with us!”
“The kappas will run away if you yell that loud!”
“You're noisy, yapping away like that. Come on now, you don't have to be so shy, Asa. Just yell all you want. Don't you want to contact aliens and ride on UFOs?”
“Do not call me Asa! If we want to exchange messages with aliens, we need to call for them through telepathy.”
“Then, use that telepathy.”
“Do not make it sound that easy. Your soul has to be one with your mind. Even God cannot do it with an uncouth wild dog howling away.”
“Alright then, I'll just shut up. I won't disturb you then, so just do it.”
“Have you done it yet?”
“You cannot keep quiet for more than 30 seconds!?”
“Because you had your eyes closed, looking so serious. Anyone would have been worried.”
“Did you not tell me to communicate with aliens through my soul.”
“Ah, so you actually did it?”
And Koremitsu patted a speechless Asai on her back.
“Very good, you finally have the enthusiasm. If you're calling for it so passionately, maybe a UFO will really come here.”
(Why are you being so over-familiar here?)
Her heart felt ticklish, and she suddenly turned her face away.
“Do...you believe in aliens, kappas, tsuchinokos and such?”
Koremitsu curled his lips and pondered for a while, before saying,
“Till just a while back, I didn't believe in them. Recently though, I'm starting to feel that there are strange things occurring on this world...or rather, I guess it might be interesting to think about it. That's why I believe in things like kappas, tsuchinokos, aliens—
Asai could sense that there was emphasis in the word 'ghost' when Koremitsu said it. The latter then continued in a mocking tone,

“In that case, maybe the aliens themselves are originally Earthlings! Their souls floated to space after they died, and then they watch the place where they live from space.”
In that case, did Hikaru go to space after all?
Perhaps Hikaru was in the midst of this starry night sky, watching the Earth from somewhere.
Koremitsu's tone and expression looked so optimistic, but when Asai thought of Hikaru's radiant smile, a suffocating breath rose up her throat.
Not willing to reveal her emotions to Koremitsu, Asai sealed her lips tightly, and pretended to focus on fishing for kappas.
Koremitsu did not speak to Asai after that, perhaps because he saw through her after all, and remained silent while dangling his reel onto the water surface.
Though he looked so gruff, so dim-witted, it seemed he was able to understand a person's emotions so acutely. This caused Asai to be reminded of Hikaru, causing her to falter further.
(Is he really Hikaru's friend...?)
It was something Hikaru really yearned.
A friend he could enjoy with, a person he could trust, a person he could share help with.
(So Hikaru left my matters to him too?)
Asai tried to accept this idea, and in the end, felt repulsed and disgusted by it.
However, Asai was not angry at the fact that they were beside a creek in the forested hills with the Summer Triangle and the Milky Way spread wide above them, the owls hooting being heard, the duo dangling their reels in silence, bickering over trivial matters from time to time; she found it inexplicable instead, and a warm sense of embarrassment arose in him.
(Did Hikaru and him spend such their time together like this...?)
She wondered.
◇ ◇ ◇
After an inconsequential verbal fight, Koremitsu glanced aside slightly to peek at Asai while the latter continued to fish for kappa, her side face looking embarrassed and frustrated, and he felt inexplicably relieved within.
(I actually don't feel annoyed after arguing with Saiga.)
He also felt it was refreshing and interesting that he was actually fishing with her in the middle of the night, arguing about trivial matters.
Asai was a woman who was not terrified of the night forest, and also a woman braver than anyone, able to fish for kappas with her back straight.
She was a reliable woman who granted comfort to those with her.
She was a feisty woman.
She was an intelligent woman.
She was a woman with frigid eyes.
And Koremitsu was seeing her charms one by one.
(Is this the real 'Asa'?)

Koremitsu asked quietly with his eyes to Hikaru, seated on the other side of Asai, cupping his knees as he watched Koremitsu and Asai with a delighted look.
And Hikaru answered with a gentle, tender look.
This is correct, Koremitsu.
Asa is really an amazing person.
◊ ◊ ◊
The still darkened sky was gradually turning a blue hue, and as the stars gradually entranced, Koremitsu stood up,
“Come with me, Asa. There's a message from Hikaru for you to see.”
“Do not call me Asa—”
She insisted, but before she could finish her words, Koremitsu was already walking far in front, yelling,
“Hey, hurry up. Or else you're going to miss it!”
(Such a rude man is Hikaru's friend? There has to be a mistake somewhere. When did Hikaru leave the message behind? It surely is just a lot of hot air.)
She thought as she muttered some wretched words in her heart, yet continued to pursue Koremitsu with all her might.
Koremitsu continued through the dark forest, holding a torchlight to light his path, pushing the plants aside as he continued with light steps. It was the first time he entered the Mikados' hill, but one had to wonder why he was able to continue walking without hesitation.
Feeling vexed within, Asai caught up to Koremitsu and walked by his side, sighing and raising her shoulders jauntily. Upon seeing her like this, Koremitsu gave a mischievous look
“What now?”
Asai glared at him, and he became flustered.
“It's nothing.”
“If you have something to say, just say it to me.”
“But if I do so, you will be angry.”
“Are you thinking of something that will make me angry?”
“See, aren't you angry now?”
Koremitsu continued forward as he grumbled about her troublesome personality.
And then, he noted bluntly,
“The way you were panting with your face red makes you look like a brat.”
Asai's face was searing red, and just when she wanted to refute Koremitsu,
“Great, we made it on time.”
Koremitsu sounded rather cheerful.
The path shrouded by the greenery opened wide, like the peak of a mountain they had climbed onto. The shallow darkness that continued to linger above them—was gradually revealing the color of dawn Appearing in their sights was a meandering path, a field of Morning Glories.

The Morning Glories were spreading their refreshing green leaves, wrapping their vines on the surrounding trees, and the tiny flower petals, once tightly shut, were waiting nervously for dawn to arrive.
And so, they slowly—
The flower petals slowly loosened its bent, concealed petals in this world of darkness—in this world that was approaching the world of dawn—loosening, opening, blooming.
The Morning Glory buds are about to bloom, no?
Hikaru had his knees bent, his hands on his head as he watched with enthusiasm the Morning Glories Asai bought to record her observation diary for summer vacation.
The duo had promised that when the petals opened, they would go look for tsuchinokos and kappas.
When the Morning Glories bloom, that is the beginning of our adventure.
But on the day they agreed to see the Morning Glories bloom together, Hikaru was locked in the school storage room, and was unable to arrive at Asai's house.
Sorry, Asa. The Morning Glories withered.
Hikaru, who was thoroughly battered, feeble who was left smiling forlornly.
Hikaru, who was unable to cry.
Hikaru, who was never to be blessed when he was born.
And from that moment onwards, Asai dedicated her all to him.
She promised him that she would never ever cry, and swore in her heart never to allow anyone else hurt Hikaru.
And Asai slowly grew up, forgetting all about the initial promise, only remembering the last one.
If Hikaru will not cry, I shall not cry either.
The karma Hikaru bore when he was born was steep, and as a child, there was a limit to what Asai herself could do. Even so, she swore never to cry, wanting to at least share the pain with him.
(Hikaru...I wanted to be your close friend, the one who most understood you, to protect your heart. You are not a child undeserving of being born, and I definitely will not allow anyone to say it. I am the only who knows about your purity, your anguish, your suffering. This is what I thought, and thus—I shall never fall in love with you.)
And so, for Hikaru's sake, she gave up her dreams, restrained her heart, denied her womanhood, and set lofty goals for herself.
However, Hikaru always remembered the initial promise he had with her, the promise she had long forgotten.
She valued Hikaru greatly in her heart.
She valued the promise with Hikaru greatly.
And Hikaru too was the same!
Asai's thoughts were not simply that straightforward.
The Morning Glories gradually bloomed, opening their soft silky smooth round petals.

The radiant blue, the noble purple, the refreshing sky blue.
And the cute pink.
There were many flower buds in the midst of this refreshing morning air, having lived through many years, finally blooming in front of Asai.
A rich, sweet voice whispered at Asai's ears as the latter's chest throbbed, breathless as she watched on.
When the Morning Glory flowers bloom, that will be the start of our adventure.
That was when Hikaru was still young.
And the grown-up Hikaru's voice overlapped and merged with it.
This is our 'start', Asa.
When the Morning Glory flowers bloom, that will be the start of our adventure.
The Morning Glories have bloom. Let us look for tsuchinokos! Fish for kappas! Exchange messages with aliens!
This is already enough, Asa. Our promise shall be fulfilled by my friend here. So Asa, it is time for a new beginning.
The stars slowly vanished, and the world gradually brightened.
Appearing in the distance was Hikaru's smile.
The wild, vibrant Morning Glory florwers were spread wide, waiting impatiently for dawn to arrive.
And beside them was a red-haired, sharp-eyed youth, standing with his back slouched slightly, his lips sealed as he gave a grim look.
Hikaru's friend—
Had conveyed Hikaru's heart to her.
He told her that the dreams she had was picked up by Hikaru, treasured and protected within Hikaru.
Thank you for accompanying me till this day. I shall be heading off alone first; you are free now, Asa.
Go to the place where you want to go, Asa!
This is your 'start', Asa.
Go out there and adventure!
You have to live for your own future, Asa!
That is my wish.
After a while, the dazzling sun rays were shining on her, and before she realized it, there was a tinge of warmth on her face.
That was the first time she shed a tear, ever since she swore never to cry.
Dazzling. The sun was ever so dazzling, yet the Morning Glories looked so blurry, and Koremitsu's face too looked blurred; the acute pain in her heart, the clinging sense of guilt all flowed out along with the tears she shed.

Perhaps Hikaru remember her words that boys and girls could not be friends when they were young children.
If only I can be friends with you, Asa.

At that time, when Hikaru said so in such an innocent manner, Asai was taken aback,
way, and told him that.
In actuality, Asai was really hoping for something so much her chest was ostensibly exploding.
Perhaps that was the beginning of the moment when she was closest to Hikaru, when she drew a line where she could not cross over.
And Hikaru probably hoped for a friend who did not draw a line against him, one he could share thoughts with, and one he could walk with when he was troubled.
The gender of that friend did not matter.
Right, just like Koremitsu.
“So...you conveyed Hikaru's message to me as his friend.”
Asai spoke with a hoarse voice.
And Koremitsu answered with a serious look.
“Thank you.”
The moment Asai whispered these words, she looked away, seemingly faltering.
He was gruff, uncouth..yet kind-hearted within, had an iron-willed heart.
And he, being such a person, was Hikaru's friend...the representative conveying Hikaru's thoughts.
Having been brought here to this forest, they did not find kappas or tsuchonokos, but they saw lots of different things.
The encounter that day with Hikaru
The encounter that day when she met him.
She could finally see the Morning Glory flowers bloom.
And the childhood Hikaru could be seen smiling cheerfully on the other end of the gradually brightening sky.
Ever since Hikaru's death, Asai's mind was always filled with images of Hikaru, always looking pale with despair, suffering, anguished. Whenever she thought of doing something for him, his face would look more dreary.
At this point, the young Hikaru in Asai's heart, and the grown up Hikaru, were finally smiling at her.
He is my friend, Asa.
And Asai took a large gulp of the cool morning air, welcoming her younger self in her heart as she bade farewell to the deceased Hikaru.
“Farewell, Hikaru.”
◊ ◊ ◊
Asa here is my 'guardian', Koremitsu.
You are saying that it is useless of me to have a woman be my 'guardian'?
Please do not say that to me with such a disgusted look.
There should be a firm-willed, sacred existence within your heart too.
When I was younger, I was always ostracized by the boys, never being able to make a single male friend. I was also always given curious, aloof looks.
The fact that Asa and Miss Aoi were with me was undoubtedly a wonderful

thing to me. This is the one aspect that made me thoroughly grateful to God.
I really thank God for having Asa be my cousin.
I really thank God for letting Asa and Miss Aoi be on such good terms.
I really thank God for having them accept me.
All of these are truly wonderful, beautiful coincidences.
If I had only met Asai and Miss Aoi as the two girls in my life, I probably would not be called a harem prince, and could have possibly lived on blissfully like this.
Living every single day with my fiancee Miss Aoi and the stern, yet reliable cousin, Asa, the three of us living happily together every single day.
I just care about myself, you say? Please do not glare at me so angrily. I know it is simply wishful thinking on my part.
But perhaps this may be what Asa wanted herself after all...
If not, there would be no way Asa would look down on Miss Aoi and stay by her side, watching over her. Asa is very clumsy herself, and she has to find a reason if she wishes to be on good terms with someone else.
I suppose the reason Asa would not fall in love in me is because she definitely wishes to maintain the relationship the three of us have.
Asa and I have an intimate, yet tense relationship.
We think of each other as our 'valuable partners', and yet we regulated ourselves strictly to prevent it from developing sweet feelings.
We shall always look at each other from each side of the border that shall not be crossed, looking at each other's existence and souls.
But no matter how much we understood each other, we definitely shall never cross that line and embrace each other.
And so, Asa kept her distance from me, watching over me. In a certain sense, this is a deeper bond than that of lovers.
And even if I died, Asa shall remain the same.
She would sacrifice her future to stand at the top of the Mikados, all to protect my secret.
She knew how much she would suffer, how much of a burden it would be, and yet she accepted all of my sins. This is all to redeem me.
Asa is strong, wise and stubborn, and it probably is unlikely to change her thinking.
But Koremitsu,
Seeing you and her squabble, I was wondering that perhaps you would be the one to change Asa's stubborn ideas. Regarding this, I have hopes over it.
You are the first boy of a similar age who did not submit to her, and took her head on.
The words you wrote moved the hearts of Asa and Madam Orime—the two 'Asagao Princesses', giving them a new leash of life.
At that moment, my heart was erratic, and when I showed you an unbecoming sight of myself, it was your lashing out that pulled me back in.

Looking at it, you gallantly saved three people at that moment.
The second happiness I have in my life is being friends to you.
After seeing your words, I too realized that my journey is still continuing, and I am on the way.
This Earth is just one stop of my journey.
So after finishing all that I have to complete in this world, I shall move on to the next destination.
And before I leave this heartrending, adorable Earth for my journey, allow me to write a long, long story with you.
It is regarding that secret of mine.
And I wish that my hero, my best friend, will listen to me.
Yes, soon after—

[Hikaru V6] Epilogue

A few days before before summer vacation ended.
They were invited by Tsuyako to a fireworks festival at the riverbank near the school.
It was convenient when everyone brought their sparklers and rocket fireworks, enjoying themselves. Speaking of fireworks, it certainly was an exciting plan to Koremitsu, who normally planned sparklers by himself at his own house.
It is the first time I am playing with fireworks by the riverbank too. So fireworks are not just played at private beaches, huh? Watching fireworks from pleasure boat or the top floor of a hotel does have their own charms, but the river does give a flowing vibe.”
Hikaru too was delighted.
It will be great if you can bring your little sister along.
Tsuyako said, and so, Koremitsu brought Shioriko along to play. Including the members of the Japanese dance club, Honoka and Michiru, there was also a sullen looking Tōjō and an overly chirpy Hiina Oumi.
“Why are you two here?”
Koremitsu asked as he stared at them, and while Tōjō's frown intensified, Hiina beside him poked her head out, speaking with clarity,
“Well well, isn't this a good thing? It's good for us to be able to improve the closeness between upperclassmen and underclassmen.”
“I do not intend to improve my relationship with all of you, but rather, I am concerned that when Aoi comes here, if she gets hurt by the fire from the light or such, or if she gets hurt by the sparkers and rocket fireworks, so I came to have a look.”
Koremitsu was about to retort that Tōjō was being too overprotective, but in contrast,
“Wait, Aoi will be coming?”
“…Ah, yes, Aoi…and Asai.”
And just when both Koremitsu and Hikaru were looking extremely stunned.
“Welcome, Miss Aoi, Miss Asai. It is good that both of you are able to make it as promised.”
Standing in front of the grinning Tsuyako was the frozen face Aoi and the stern looking Asai.
“I-I just want to play with some fireworks.”
Aoi looked back and forth between Tsuyako and Asai, meeting them in the eyes before she answered, this, and Asai shot Tsuyako a frigid stare, answering brusquely,
“I am just here to supervise all of you so that you do not get into trouble.”
Tsuyako gave a bewitching smile, saying,

“Is that so? But I am glad both of you are willing to accept my invitation. Please enjoy yourselves however you want.”
Asai's eyes still seemed cold, and Aoi too turned her head aside, looking perturbed and annoyed, her eyebrows frowning.
Both of them left the scene without looking at each other
But after that, the candle used for lighting fireworks was blown out due to the wind, and Aoi tried using the lighter to light the candle again, only to no avail. At this moment, Asai approached her.
“If you are going to cover the candle from the wind using just your fingers, 10 years will be insufficient for you to light it. Please lend me that.”
Aoi turned her head around in shock, and upon seeing Asai, immediately straightened her back as she showed a feisty glint in her eyes.
“I can do this myself. Please hand me that lighter.”
And after she said this with a convicted voice, she reached her hand out.
Asai gave a cold stare back at Aoi, and after a pause of silence,
“...You are not supposed to just tap at it. You need to rub it hard.”
She restrained her emotions as she spoke stoically, and placed the lighter on Aoi's hand.
Aoi widened her eyes, looking ready to burst into tears, and bit her lips, remaining silent. She then showed a serious look as she stared at the lighter.
After rubbing the fingers a few times, she managed to start a fire.
Aoi opened her lips slightly, her expression relaxed.
And Asai continued to stare at Aoi silently.
Once she finished lighting the candle, Aoi looked over at Asai tentatively.
And once their eyes met, both of them gave perturbed looks, averted their eyes again, and left awkwardly.
However, Aoi still went over to Asai's direction.
And Asai stared in Aoi's direction immediately afterwards. Koremitsu and Hikaru watched on from the sidelines.
Asa and Miss Aoi may not be able to revert back to that sort of relationship back then. But as time passes, both of them should be able to have a new, better relationship than before.”
Hikaru, right at the river that was glittering with moonlight, was basked under the clear moonlight, his expression tender as he spoke.
And Koremitsu spoke cheerfully,
“If you as the childhood friend says so, I guess it'll definitely end up that way.”
The wind rustled at the river surface and grass, and it was a little humid and warm, with the summer still lingering.
While the stoic looking Asai held a stick firework in her hand, Hiina, holding two fireworks in her hands, approached the former.
Aoi looked troubled when Tsuyako approached her to mingle around with an earnest smile, helping to make some of the fireworks.

And Tōjō was staring intently at the cat called Lapis, now in Shioriko's clutches. He tried to reach his hand out to it, only for it to slip away, and he was left confounded.
Koremitsu saw Honoka playing with fireworks at the riverbank, and walked over to her.
And once the latter noticed him approaching, she looked around, pretending to sense that there was movement around her, only to give a quick glance in Koremitsu's direction.
And when Koremitsu took a step forward, Honoka backed away a little.
He took another step, and Honoka averted her eyes, nudging back a little.
(What is she so fidgety about?)
And so, Koremitsu took a large stride forward, closing the distance to Honoka in one go, and grabbed her hand, staring at her.
He seized the opportunity to speak up before Honoka could, clearly showing that he was unwilling to let go.
“Thank you for that talk we had just a while back. It really helped me out a lot. Well, that's not the only time; thanks all everything! I've been causing you trouble all this time right, Shikibu? I feel that I'm able to see something I never saw before after talking to you!”
And Honoka stared at Koremitsu with her face all reddened.
Enduring the shame within him, Koremitsu confessed earnestly,
“And well, I-I may be a little stubborn, and I hate keeping a distance from you, you know? It's like whenever I avoid you, I feel like I got a tummyache from food poisoning or something.”
“I don't really know what sort of feeling this is, and even though you asked whether you can like me, I still can't answer it now, but I'll definitely find an answer! S-so-so anyway, can I stay with you just a little?”
His face was scalding.
And his hand, now hold Honoka's, was so hot it was about to melt.
But Koremitsu felt that no matter how ashamed he was, no matter how disgraceful it was for him, he had to convey these honest, unpretentious feelings he had pondered so much to Honoka no matter what.
The other firework in Honoka's hand burned its final lights, slowly sizzling and reducing to ash, falling to her feet.
She lifted her head, and looked at Koremitsu, completely flabbergasted, nodding,
And then, she lowered her eyes bashfully, muttering,
“I shall be waiting.”
After hearing this voice that oozed of sweetness, Koremitsu grew increasingly embarrassed, his entire body so ticklish he wanted to roll about on the floor. However, he scowled, groaned, and nodded with Honoka.
Hikaru behind him was enjoying himself, muttering,
This is your first promise with Miss Shikibu. It will be great if I can be still on this world and hear the replies from your mouths.”
At this moment, Shioriko suddenly barged in,

“Big brother Koremitsu! Shiiko wants to play with the mouse fireworks, wanna let it spin and bounce about!”
“It's too dangerous, no way.”
“You can just watch over me, big brother.”
She grabbed Koremitsu by the hand, and pulled him away from Honoka.
“But it won't bounce around with me watching.”
“Then, how about we play with some normal sparklers instead?”
An obstinate Shioriko dragged Koremitsu with both hands, her cheeks puffed. Michiru Hanasato was in the other direction, raising her eyebrows as she placed her hands in front of her petite chest, looking at Koremitsu. She seemed a little lethargic, but for an instant, showed a faint smile.
As usual, she ran off to Honoka.
Aoi and Tsuyako were lighting the fireworks by the riverbank, firing them in unison, and the red, blue stars glittered, lighting the river surface.
And at the same time, cheers and laughter of joy danced together towards the summer night sky.
(I can't see the Summer Triangle and the Milky Way here.)
But surely, on the other end of the atmosphere, the stars would be dazzling brightly, just as he had witnessed at that hill.
Shioriko and Hiina let one rocket firework after another, creating a ruckus.
“Hey, don't fire it at someone!”
He warned them, and looked over in Asai's direction, seeing her narrowing her eyes as she looked up at the sky. She seemed forlorn, but her back was straightened like usual, and she was giving a positive look.
And the moment she noticed Koremitsu staring at her, she lowered her lips slightly, pouting.
(I know what you were thinking about)
And Koremitsu too showed such an expression as he pouted his lips too.
Once Asai guided her eyes towards his side, she showed a tender expression.
And then, she turned her head aside again, showing an exceptionally grim look as she approached Koremitsu.
“Mr Akagi, I have something I wish to talk to you about.”
“About what?”
“About Hikaru.”
“Yes, as Hikaru's friend, you have to hear this.”
Koremitsu was surprised to hear Asai say the words 'Hikaru's friend'.
However, there was no time for any sentiments as she continued her words with a grim look,
“The true identity of the one Hikaru truly loves. This love that was unable to come true became his—”
Recalling Yū's words, Koremitsu was rendered breathless.
And a serene voice rang beside him.
With a pale face and a determined look, Hikaru stared at Koremitsu and the rest.

Regarding that, please allow me to say it.”
◇ ◇ ◇
“I say, Third Princess, Hikaru's
is not little Aoi, no?”
There was a bewitching light glowing from the moon after.
Kazuaki was leaning by the rail at the villa's balcony, staring at the stars that were somewhat blurry, talking to the chameleon.
“We were completely fooled. It was...truly unexpected.”
Amidst the rustling breeze, he continued to fiddle with the long black hair and the hem of the scarlet one piece dress, opening his lips smoothly.
“Hu hu hu, can you believe it, Third Princess? Hikaru's beloved is Hikaru's —”
◇ ◇ ◇
I tried to hate.
I tried to show disdain.
But I could not.
The fact was that it was determined you were my 'beloved' the moment you said the first beautiful line to me.
Yes, my beloved is always you.
But Hikaru.
Your beloved—

(Th-this cat! It is the one Yū left behind, no—)
The slender white cat was at this point in the hands of a girl who called Koremitsu Akagi 'big brother', and Shungo had his back bent, his chin pointed as he stared at it, looking engrossed.
It had cool beryl blue eyes and snow white fur.
There was no doubt it was the cat Yū Kanai named as Lapis and lived together.
Once he recalled that Yū was living in Australia, he understood why the cat was living at Koremitsu's house.
He was mesmerized by Yū, who was akin to a dreamy, pure flower, and continued to give Yū aid in the background. To Shungo, Lapis was a symbol of her.
Unlike the round pudgy Holstein cat Aoi doted on, Shungo did not know whether it had killing intent, since Koremitsu did take it in, but this noble Lapis caused his heart to quiver.
“…Do you mind letting me hug?”
Shungo made a cautious question, and the girl holding the cat, Shioriko Wakagi, stared at him as if he was a lolicon pervert, backing away.
Having understood that his words were misinterpreted,
“No, I am referring to the cat in your hands.”
He corrected himself immediately, reaching his hand at Lapis that was in Shioriko's hands.
But when he reached his hand out, Lapis snuggled out from Shioriko's chest, leaped off, and sneaked into the grass.
“Wait, Lapis!”
Shioriko then gave chase after Lapis.
But before that, she turned over to Shungo, saying,
“Lapis hates you.”
And at this moment, Shungo was all the more dejected.
(Is it because I reached my hand out? Or is it because it was too sudden? Or I should let matters progress little by little? Or that it is fine if it is Akagi?)
As he continued to ponder,
“And you are showing another frown again.”
Tsuyako stood there, watching with a teasing look.
On this day, Tsuyako had her hair bundled, her white nape exposed as she wore a short summer one piece dress with her shoulders showing, holding her sandals as she went barefooted. It certainly was an alluring, suggestive appearance.
“Miss Asai may be like this now, but you certainly do not looking like a high school student being like this, Mr Shungo. I should say you do lack the

liveliness of a youth. If you have issues you are brooding over, how about you have a chat with me?”
Her lips were giving off a red similar to her hair, perhaps because she had lipstick on. Perhaps the gloss of her lips was the reason it started to glow radiantly under the moonlight.
“No need for that. It will be troublesome later on if I owe a favor to a woman of the Udates.”
“You sure can say such a thing to women. That is why you will not be able to get a girlfriend.”
“That is unnecessary banter. It is not that I cannot get one, but that I do not wish to have one. I do have other important issues to deal with.”
Tsuyako again showed a sly smile,
“I see. However, even though you hate me, I do have to thank you for helping me invite Miss Asai and Miss Aoi out. I suppose the two of us will never have a common cause if I had not spoke up first”
Her expression softened gradually, and she spoke cheerfully,
“Thank you, Mr Shungo.”
She lowered her head gently and gracefully.
And Shungo remained silent.
“Aoi…I do not wish to see her being hurt. I chipped in my effort for your plan for my own convenience. It was unexpected that you would suggest patching matters between Aoi and Asai.”
And then, Tsuyako gave a mature look,
“It is because of me that Miss Aoi knew of Miss Asai's feelings, and this is my way of apologizing. Besides, I do like both of them, even though both of them—especially Miss Aoi, really hates me here.”
“Of course.”
Shungo concluded with a serious look.
“That is to be expected.”
And then, he gave a bright smile.
For some inexplicable, this bright smile that finally appeared again was not filled with the disgust he had before this.
The scandal with Hikaru, the commotion that involved Aoi before the summer vacation, all those events were unforgivable. However, for this night, he called a ceasefire for Aoi's sake.
“It is good that Miss Aoi and Miss Asai…are able to get along well…”
He agreed silently, turned to look at Aoi,
And immediately raised his eyebrows.
Aoi was staring in a direction with yearning and sadness, the other end of her stare being Koremitsu Akagi, standing there and holding hands with his classmate Honoka Shikibu, their heads lowered shyly.
Aoi's eyes looked so heartbroken as she watched on, and till this point, he had yet to see Aoi show such a mature, feminine vibe, now appearing gradually on her face.
And while Tōjō groaned,

Tsuyako, standing beside him, called out in surprise.
He looked over there, and found Asai staring at Koremitsu with a passionate stare.
It seemed to be self-explanatory as to why her expression got harsher, her girlish troubles and focus clearly displayed on her face. It was not really visible as it was night, but perhaps Asai's lips at this point were slightly dyed red.
She opened her lips amorously.
This was the first time Asai showed 'her feminine face'.
And she was looking at that Koremitsu Akagi!!
(Asai...you too!?)
Shungo inadvertently hugged his head.
At this moment, even Koremitsu's class representative, Michiru had her hands clasped in front of her chest, staring in Koremitsu's direction with much agony. That girl suddenly had a drastic image change in this summer, like a different person, and the reason was definitely clear to see.
Why exactly is everyone infatuated with that man!
No, Koremitsu Akagi did save Yū and Tsuyako before, and his assistance through calligraphy this time had to be recognized. Shungo did not do anything much during that incident, but he did hear of what Koremitsu did at the Gonomiya residence. Truly, he was filled with anxiety and regret—
“Big brother.”
Shioriko in turn ran towards Koremitsu, holding the latter's hand like a child, forcefully pulling him away from Honoka's sights.
(Even that kind of a elementary school girl—)
He was left all the more speechless, rage swirling in his head as he inadvertently glared in Koremitsu's direction, before meeting Hiina Oumi in the eyes.
Hiina immediately let loose of the plump cheeks as she gave a hearty smile.
Though he felt relieved at this point, he felt guilt of his own inaptness for being unable to officially recognize his adorable little sister, and frowned harder.
Tsuyako continued to stare in Asai's direction as she muttered to herself,
“In this situation, I do not suppose Miss Asai and Miss Aoi can patch things together...Mr Akagi's lack of awareness is really a sin.”
As she had said, that person was really the same breed as Hikaru, perhaps even changing his title from a delinquent king to a harem king. As Shungo frowned and wondered about this, a white cat was squatting down at his feet unwittingly, probably peering at Shungo with its head raised and its cool eyes, its pink petal-like tongue licking at its fur.

[Hikaru V6] Author's Notes

Hello there, this is Mizuki Nomura. As per the preview of the 6 volume of 'When Hikaru Was On the Earth...' , the lead this time is Asa. The original basis of this character, the Saiin priestess Asagao was paternal cousins with Lord Genji, and ever since young, she had been pursued by Lord Genji, but she was a princess who protected her independence. She could be one of his formal wives due to her noble status, but she refused as she did not want to be like Lady Rokujō. I did find it enjoyable trying to imagine her personality, whether she was a proud, dignified person, or whether she was a paranoid person.

Asai's character at first was designated to be similar to Tsuyako in personality, Koremitsu's collaborator and the second heroine. However, when I tampered with the plot, I ended up turning her into an antagonist...and her personality got steadily sharper. After that, it seems she actually went on a fruitless efforts realizing her feelings for Koremitsu. For the 'Hikaru' series, this volume marks the latter half of it. I hope to continue the rest with everyone.

In this December, when this volume is realized, Gangan Comics will be releasing the second volume of the 'Aoi , When Hikaru was On the Earth...' comci. The cover this time is really pretty, really amazing! It's a Honoka picture! I was too concerned with the title here that I could not see Honoka, the closest girl to Koremitsu, appearing on the cover, and when I saw it personally, I was really delighted. It is only published now, but since it is because of Famitsu Bunko's HP collaborating with the retailers, I will try to flesh out Honoka more. I do have pictures of Honoka dressed in kimono and gym clothing jumping around. Miss Takeoka too is doing her best, day by day, to improve Honoka's beauty greatly.

The next volume 'Hikaru 7' is Utsusemi. When I first began planning, I felt this was a volume I had to write no matter what, and I really feel blessed that I can write till this point. This volume will show a great change within Koremitsu.

The sale will be set at Spring like usual, and before that, there is the 3 volume of 'I am a Royal Tutor in My Sister's Dress'. I will continue to do my best while writing Seira, so please have a look at it. Let us meet in Spring then!

November 3rd 2012,

Mizuki Nomura.

Kasuomi, Tada, 2009,
Man'yōshū Explained, Tokyo, Chikuma Shobō,
Jun, Kubota, 2009, Kokin Wakashū New Edition Volume 6, Tokyo, Kadokawa Liberal Arts Corporation.

Hideo, Aragaki, Ryuta, Ida, Senei, Ikenobou ,Matsunosuke, Nishiyama, 1988, 4 Seasons Flower Calendar (Autumn), Tokyo, Kodansha Corporation.
Tomokichi, Inose, Hideo, Inose, 1985, Nature and Science 49, Asagao, Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten
Yoshiaki, Komeda, 2006, Classification of Flowers, Illustration book, Asagao, Shinagawa, Gakken
Miki Iioka, 1997, Translated from English, Anne, Mcintyre, The Healing Charms of Flowers, Tokyo, Gaia Books